

*What I Chose:*

Enhancing Suicide Prevention through Young Adult (YA) Fiction

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## Abstract

*What I Chose* is a Young Adult (YA) fictional novella that emerged from my desire to use popular literature as a tool to promote good health. I read and evaluated a series of six popular YA fiction books that contain themes of suicide, and I attempt to emulate the effective literary techniques of these best-selling authors alongside safe messaging into my work. I use my protagonist, Kiara, and Emma, her deceased twin who died by suicide, to exemplify individuals at risk for suicide. I also include supporting characters that show readers a way to reach out to those that display suicidal signs. I form my novella around Kiara's journey as a transfer freshman at UH who is looking for a restart in life but finds herself uncovering the death and story of her twin that she had no prior knowledge of. Kiara is looked at by those who knew Emma as if she had returned from the dead, and she finds herself given a second chance at life. Similar to most of the YA novels I read in my research, *What I Chose* aims to hopefully illuminate the meaning in finding purpose, hope, and embracing the choices we are given in this life. Since popular culture and ideology can be influenced by successful YA literature (due to its large readership), it is essential to appropriately expand upon a YA "health promoting" subgenre that can be didactic and that can potentially improve holistic well-being and possibly reduce detrimental behavior.

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## Introduction

For the purpose of my project, I used and merged principles from litany English Studies and Public Health to evaluate how public health issues intersect with literature and the potential it holds. I was inspired to create a project that would address a public health issue in a nontraditional way; thus, I chose to focus on how suicide prevention could be enhanced through Young Adult (YA) fiction and write a creative piece that adds to a “health promoting” YA subgenre. Through my research, I have found popular YA fictional genre that engages with health issues to be significant, and its expansion could be advantageous if done well. If this subgenre of YA fiction were to be established and promoted properly—not just for the sake of economic gain—it would be worth the investment, and it could be an effective tool in the promotion of good health. The subgenre would concentrate on realistic struggles of young people, their psychological and physical development, and aim to promote discussion on suicide, raise awareness of the self and of others, improve holistic well-being, and increase prevention of detrimental behaviors. My goal is to adapt these objectives into my novella, *What I Chose*, and, with the integration of safe messaging, to emulate effective literary techniques and themes of current best-selling YA authors who have published novels regarding suicide.

## Significance: The Issue at Hand

Suicide is the leading cause of death of university students in the United States (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2014), and intervention methods that could help improve prevention should be investigated. According to the National Mental Health Association (2002), approximately 1,100 college students die each year as result of suicide (as cited in The Jed Foundation, 2006). Nonetheless, those statistics only account for enrolled university students. On



national level, the numbers are above and beyond that for the same age group. That being said, more and more YA books are including themes of suicide as well, and many of these books pair it with mental illnesses—although the association is not wholly inaccurate. Mental health issues often play a significant role in suicide outcomes with approximately 90% of those who die by suicide at any age having a diagnosable mental illness (The Jed Foundation, 2006). That, however, does not change the fact that stigma and barriers to seeking help form around suicide and mental illnesses. Thus, the way they are depicted to a mass public audience should be highly considered since ideas and generalizations from popular culture can become a part of a society's ideology. Already, there is a kind of social need to be or remain “normal” and that tends to drive an individual when he or she is choosing to seek help or not. Untreated mental health disorders not only affect multiple aspects of a person or a student's life (e.g. academics, relationships, and involvement on-campus) and can lead to suicidal behaviors but also affect the community (The Jed Foundation, 2006). As many barriers as possible should be eliminated, and authors of popular YA fiction have an opportunity to make a difference.

## YA Literature as a Possible Place for Prevention

Literature, more often than not, is overlooked when it comes to searching for ways to improve the health of the general public. However, a literary science in relation to health should be considered when looking to expand methods for suicide prevention. The reader-response dynamic that literature and even narratives provide are measurable to some extent. The evaluation of literary methods and strategies could lead to techniques that would make literature more effective in terms of health promotion. Data that can be derived from fictional literature could be qualitative, such as, “How did the story make you feel about suicide?” or even

quantitative, “Does the story change your perspective of suicide?” There is room to further investigate the effectiveness YA literature and its impact on the perception of health issues. YA fiction books, after all, rack up large revenues and reach a particularly large audience. They have an influence over their readership as they have the ability to assimilate into popular culture and influence ideology.

While YA fiction is potentially a promising outlet to promote and influence behaviors and perspectives, the reality is that these popular and widely sold novels are not monitored by any sort of health officials; they are published mostly, if not entirely, to make money. The YA book publishing industry is a gold mine; over 715 million YA books were sold in 2013, and John Green’s book, *The Fault in Our Stars*, sold over 10 million copies and grossed more than \$300 million with the release of its film (PBS Newshour, 2014). Jim Milliot, the editorial director of Publisher’s Weekly (a trade magazine that tracks publishing trends and business), confirms that YA fiction has included the biggest blockbuster series and titles over the last ten to five years (PBS Newshour, 2014). The mass interest, however, has stepped away from dystopian novels like *The Hunger Games* and has moved toward what Aimee Friedman, a New York Times best-selling author, and others refer to as “John Green lit,” namely contemporary realistic stories about teens facing everyday challenges (PBS Newshour, 2014). This fad has even reached Hawai‘i, and



Figure 1



Figure 2

consequently, the local Hawai'i Barnes and Noble reinforces this trend, as seen in Figures 1 and Figure 2.

Although the intended audience of YA books is typically below 18, 77% of the YA buyers and real audience are 18+ (PBS Newshour, 2014). The genre is beloved by many because it has aspects that masses can relate with and often become popular films or TV series, as well (PBS Newshour, 2014). Readers are engaged with characters and can even connect to certain ones on a personal level. Evidently, the largest age group of buyers for YA fiction is 18-29 (43%) (PBS Newshour, 2014) which happens to correlate with the highest population at risk for suicide for Hawai'i specifically, the 16-29 age group (Galsnis, 2016). For Hawai'i (2011-2015), suicide has been in the number one spot for causes of fatal injuries for the 16-29 age group, 30-44 age group, and 60-74 age group (Galsnis, 2016). It is also the highest overall for causes of fatal injuries in Hawai'i (Galsnis, 2016). Since around the mid-teens is a starting point for this high trend of suicide, it would be effective to address this population. Nevertheless, a correlation does not imply a direct solution but rather a possible approach to the issue.

### Significance of Story-Telling

Young Adult literature directly influences young people; they actively seek out these books, so what is conveyed is important. But the nature of stories are significant to us. Jonathan Culler, a literary theorist, offers some fundamental idea of this concept in his book, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. He acknowledges that novels and narrative type writing has a mass readership and has been the dominant discourse for literary education since the 1960s (before that it was poetry) (Culler, 2000). He also writes that stories are a way that people make sense of things as their lives are a progression leading somewhere or in telling themselves what is happening in the world; essentially, to understand how one thing logically leads to another

(Culler, 2000). “There is a basic human drive to hear and tell stories,” Culler (2000) states in his chapter on narratives. Stories themselves do a few essential things. For one, stories give pleasure which, as Aristotle tells us, we do so through imitation of life and their rhythm (Culler, 2000). Stories can also give twist to familiar situations, amuse, and teach us about the world, according to theorist (Culler, 2000). “Showing us how it works, enabling us—through the devices of focalization—to see things from other vantage points, and to understand others’ motives that are in general opaque to us” (Culler, 2000).

### Medical Narratives and PSAs

It is not surprising, then, that stories have their place in medicine and public service announcements (PSAs). Medical narratives have proven to be an effective method. Reflective writing has already been established as an educating method; medical students are capable of more empathetic interactions with patients after reflective exercises; thus, narratives have potential for being integrated into the medical curricula (Dasgupta, S., & Charon, R, 2004). “Affording students and residents an opportunity to describe and share their illness experiences may counteract the traditional distancing of physicians’ minds from their bodies and lead to more empathic and self-aware practice (Dasgupta, S., & Charon, R., 2004).” The power it contains should be acknowledged and utilized to benefit the public.

Even the Department of Health (DOH) of Hawai‘i is turning to narratives to address particular issues such as suicide and domestic violence (Hawai‘i State Department of Health, 2016). The DOH and Emergency Medical Services & Injury Prevention Branch (EMSIPSB) have partnered with the Hawai‘i Public Health Training Hui to create an online Story Bank called “Voices of Prevention” (Hawai‘i State Department of Health, 2016). This Story Bank aims to be an “educational resource of inspiring and impactful stories with the goal of guiding us

through experiences of injury prevention, safety and wellness throughout the life span, and in all areas of injury free living” (Hawai‘i State Department of Health, 2016). Story-telling, thus, has become a method that the department finds efficient in conveying vital messages to the public. They even have trainings for this kind of public health story-telling (Hawai‘i State Department of Health, 2016). Like the theory in Culler’s book suggests, people are drawn to stories, and they tend to listen and respond to them—making them worth the investment.

### YA Literature in the Classroom

On top of being an informal health promotion tool, YA literature can address specific health issues in formal educational settings. Jay Asher, the YA fiction author of the popular *Thirteen Reasons Why*, has stated his intentions in his novel—which contains themes of suicide—is to convey that “everything affects everything.” He especially stresses this idea in terms of bullying and emphasizes the importance of reaching out. He is actively promoting these messages and has promoted how his book can be of use to young adults; the Penguin Books has established a curriculum for *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Spicer, n.d.). On the front of the guide is also the claim, “The activities in this guide align with Common Core State Standards and fit into the curriculum for grades 7–10” (Spicer, n.d.). The approach and methodology of this guide included discussion questions and activities that directly correlated with themes and issues that arose in the book. I wanted to see how these theoretical lesson plans compared with the reality in a classroom setting. Thus, I conducted an interview.

I was fortunate enough to talk with Jane Raissle, an English teacher at Assets on Oahu, who has had experience utilizing various YA books in her class or providing them to students to read on their own (many of the books I had read and evaluated for this project). She believes that books with suicide should be available to students, as the issues are important to discuss.

However, for a formal classroom setting, she stated that the maturity of the class was important to determine whether or not they could handle the topic. She always evaluates her students and gets to know them before assigning a book. Nevertheless, she uses YA fiction because her students find these readings interesting and engaging. Raissle added that it could be harder to read and discuss a book on suicide with larger classes, such as those in public schools, because there is such a wide range of maturity levels. As for the actual classroom discussions, she would have specific questions that the class could talk about, and they would share their reflections. They begin with looking at comprehension components such as character development and themes; these activities are similar to those found in the Penguin Book guide for *Thirteen Reasons Why*. While Raissle used *Looking for Alaska*, by John Green, rather than Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the themes and issues addressed are somewhat alike. She reported that her students handled the book well and took the issues seriously. She also had her students read some articles on teen suicide for non-fiction context. She had a counselor come into the class as well to speak to the kids, which they found interesting. This inclusion is an effective way for high schoolers to be provided with information and resources, although this strategy was not in the Penguin Book guide but essential for education. As for her class library, she has books available to students like *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, *Speak*, *Perks of Being a Wall Flower*, *All the Bright Places*, and *Go Ask Alice* which include themes of domestic violence, bullying, and suicide. So far, no parents have objected to teaching or providing access to these kinds of books (J. Raissle, personal communication, August 19, 2016). Other teachers should follow Raissle's lead, but institutions should invest in training teachers for these kinds of lessons first. It may not be quite clear how these books can be worked into the educational system, but there are definite benefits when done so successfully since it opens up the

conversation, especially over difficult topics like suicide. Even Jay Asher, when referring to *Thirteen Reasons Why*, stated in an interview,

Some people, primarily adults, would rather there be no books dealing with controversial subjects, even if those books start a dialogue between teens and adults. Thankfully, I've heard from a lot of parents and teachers and librarians who are using this book for that very reason (Asher, 2007).

## Methodology for *What I Chose*

Since popular books can affect people's conception of an issue, whether the ideas they project are true or not, it is important that some consideration on safety be put into their publication. I wanted to understand how best-selling authors constructed their novels and the intentions they put behind them. I read a series of six popular YA books regarding suicide during my PH485 course, and Table 1 summarizes my findings in detail. The books I selected were the following:

### *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher

- **Characters:** Clay and Hannah (classmate)
- **Synopsis:** Clay listens to audio tapes that reveal Hannah's 13 reasons for suicide (mainly involving bullying). The more he listens, the more he wishes he reached out.
- **Themes:** Bullying and how one thing affects another. Treat others well. Reach out to others and reach out when needed.

### *I Was Here* by Gayle Forman

- **Characters:** Cody and Meg (best friend)
- **Synopsis:** Cody investigates the story behind Meg's suicide and tries to find someone to blame. She discovers Meg had depression.
- **Themes:** Accepting and forgiving yourself. Slight address to stigma around depression.

### *It's Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini

- **Characters:** Craig

- **Synopsis:** Craig suffers from depression and anxiety. When he contemplates suicide one day, he ends up calling the suicide hotline. He is put in an adult inpatient psychiatric hospital for a few days.
- **Themes:** Overcoming suicidal thoughts, depression, and anxiety. Hope. Reaching out.

*The Last Time We Say Goodbye* by Cynthia Hand

- **Characters:** Lexie and Ty (brother)
- **Synopsis:** Lexie struggles with coping her brother's death but eventually comes to terms with. Brother had depression.
- **Themes:** Coping and coming to terms with reality. How to move forward and find hope after a tragedy. For those coping.

*All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven

- **Characters:** Violet and Finch (boyfriend)
- **Synopsis:** Finch and Violet become unlikely friends. Finch struggles with suicidal thoughts and fears being labeled. Finch helps Violet see hope in life, but he dies by suicide at the end
- **Themes:** Importance of reaching out. Stigma and the barriers it can cause. Hope for life

*The Program* by Suzanne Young

- **Characters:** Sloane and Brady (brother)
- **Synopsis:** Sloane struggles with brother's death. Resists being sad to avoid being sent to The Program by her parents. Program brainwashes all teenagers to keep them from killing themselves.
- **Themes:** Resisting. Understanding human emotions are okay to have

Each of these novels has influenced my writing style for *What I Chose*, and five of the six books articulate a sincere intent in the afterword or foreword. Asher, Forman, Vizzini, Hand, and Niven were all affected by a suicide in one way or another during their lifetime and advocated for prevention (only Young's novel did not). Four of these authors provided resources for suicide and even mental illnesses in their afterword; Rachel Cohn included resources in foreword since the edition I read was published after Vizzini's death by suicide. For chapter headnotes, I used a variety of quotes from these books. I felt inspired to have the same kind of positive intentions driving my novella's plot and characters with the addition of integrating safe messaging.



## Summary of *What I Chose*

My novella follows a University of Hawai‘i transfer freshman girl named Kiara who battles with suicidal thoughts but is looking for a restart in life after her previous suicide attempt. The story takes place when Kiara, her dad, and her stepmother (who she despises for trying so hard to be her mother) first arrive to Hawai‘i for the beginning of the spring semester. Kiara, who has a history of being bullied, never had any close friends. But her new roommate, Annthea, is a bubbly and friendly girl who quickly becomes fond of Kiara.

As she begins her journey at UH, she finds herself being watched as if she were a ghost—as if she had returned from the dead. When a maintenance issue arises in her and Annthea’s room, they move into a new room, but that room, as she soon discovers, was the place her unknown identical twin sister, Emma, died by suicide the semester prior. Kiara crosses paths with Emma’s old friend group—Kaden, Scarlettte, and Hannah—who are shocked to see the face of their friend who recently passed. She gets pulled into their circle and their friendship grows.

Kiara discovers clues planted by Emma and sets off on a scavenger hunt to reveal the story left behind by a dead girl. She learns the tale of a girl who is identical, yet completely different from herself. Eventually, Emma appears in Kiara’s dreams and guided her toward some answers. Kiara finds herself in a violent situation with Emma’s abusive ex, an emotional conversation with Emma’s father figure, and a dramatic confrontation with her birth mother.

The story closes with bringing the group of friends back together after a fall out through Annthea’s death in a moped accident. Kiara realizes the things she can’t control and ends up reaching out for the things she can. In the end, she chooses to seek help, but most of all, she chooses to live.

### Adapted Plot and Character Techniques

For plot, I drew upon the structure was similar to that of *I Was Here* by Gayle Forman for my novella. Kiara spends a lot of time in the story searching for answers as Cody does in *I Was Here*; for both, what they find along the way changes their outlook on life. The six of the novels I read contained a first person narrator, and I deemed it appropriate to do the same. I chose this point of view because of what it can convey. In *All the Bright Places*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, and *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, the reader gets a glimpse of what is going on in the mind of character at risk for suicide. It shows the ambivalence and struggle that individuals face, which was something I wanted to include in my own work. Thus, I decided that juxtaposing the first person narrative of Kiara with pieces of Emma's story would work best. I wanted their interaction to be somewhat like Clay's (the protagonist) and Hannah's (deceased classmate) in Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* because of the fascinating appeal of having the living communicating with the dead, and also because the novel had so much success with this set up. After it was published in 2007, it spent 65 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list and has been sold in 30 countries ("Thirteen Reasons Why' Heads to Paperback," 2011). Just in the U.S., 750,000 print copies have been sold. ("Thirteen Reasons Why' Heads to Paperback," 2011). Currently, the book has been turned into a popular Netflix series that has gained a lot of attention, especially through social media.

Asher also received positive emails from teens commenting on how much the book impacted their lives as a response and 13RWProject.com was a by-product of the book as well. There are also countless positive reader reviews on his site (Asher, 2007). Finally, the story strives, as do the other books I have read for this project, to include suicide warning signs in characters which is what I try to adapt in *What I Chose*.

## Safe Messaging and How it is Used in *What I Chose*

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center provides a fundamental Do's and Don'ts guide when it comes to creating safe and effective messaging to raise public awareness around suicide. The information is evidenced-based recommendations, and with *What I Chose*, I try to match those guidelines (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, n.d.). How I tried to align my novella with the guidelines can be found in the following:

### **The Do's**

#### **1. “Do emphasize help-seeking and provide information on finding help.”**

Kiara is reluctant to seek professional help at the beginning because she fears she will be judged. Kaden, especially, encourages her to see a counselor. In the end, she finally does. In Chapter 3 there is also a flyer that Kiara sees on her way to class that promotes the counseling center on campus.

#### **2. “Do emphasize prevention.”** Kiara and Emma are on similar tracks, but Kiara's story proves that suicide is preventable. With help, she finds a way to cope and chooses to live.

#### **3. “Do list the warning signs, as well as risk and protective factors of suicide.”**

I use both Kiara and Emma to display warning signs. I also have supporting characters who point some of them out and draw attention to them.

#### **4. “Do highlight effective treatments for underlying mental health problems.”**

Seeing a counselor and seeking help is brought up multiple times in the story.

Kiara's friend group at UH also exemplifies social support and an understanding community around her.

## The Don'ts

- **“Don’t glorify or romanticize suicide or people who have died by suicide.”**

Though my novella is dramatic, it does not glorify suicide. Instead, it shows the rippling effects of how much suicide can affect friends, family, and a community.

- **“Don’t normalize suicide by presenting it as a common event.”** My novella presents suicide not as a common event, but as a tragedy that happens more often than it should and more often than we think (because of barriers that bury awareness).

- **“Don’t present suicide as an inexplicable act or explain it as a result of stress only.”** Emma’s story is complex and revealed throughout the book. Her death by suicide was not solely a result of stress. It had many facets to it.

- **“Don’t focus on personal details of people who have died by suicide.”** Naturally, YA fiction stories are dramatic, which is one thing that attracts readers. Details of Emma’s story are focused on, and Kiara does end up associating herself with Emma. However, it is juxtaposed with Annthea’s death, a moped accident, and it changes Kiara’s perception of death and how it affects the people around her.

- **“Don’t present overly detailed descriptions of suicide victims or methods of suicide.”** Throughout the book, I leave details on Emma’s death by suicide ambiguous and focus on other things. I wanted to avoid having too many explicit details of a suicide, as done with Meg’s death was in *I Was Here*. In Cody’s journey, she discovers the exact detailed plan that Meg made and pursued.

In addition to the Do's and Don'ts listed, language and wording needs to be highly considered. Young's novel *The Program*, for example, failed to frame suicide appropriately. On the front cover, the novel addresses suicide as an "epidemic," which is not considered safe messaging and is also depicting suicide as a common event. This kind of misuse of language is what I wanted to avoid for my writing, so I was conscious of writing phrases like "died by suicide" rather than "committed suicide" since "committed" has such a strong negative connotation to it and puts blame on the person.

#### Strategies from the *Suicide Intervention Handbook*

I also applied some of strategies I found in the *Suicide Intervention Handbook* into *What I Chose*. The book was written by Richard F. Ramsey, MSW; Bryan L. Tanney, FRCP; Wm. A. Lang, PhD; and Taire Kinzel, BScN, MEd, and it provides advice for gatekeepers and signs to look for when someone is at risk for suicide. The purpose of the book is to "introduce concerned community members to suicide first-aid intervention skills" (Ramsey, R. F., Tanney, B. L., Lang, W. A., & Kinzel, Tarie, 2004). Overall, I do my best to implement some of the information from this book into my characters and their behaviors. In my novella, I use Kiara and Emma to convey alarming signs for suicide. I also use supporting characters, such as Kaden and Annthea, to show readers basic gatekeeping strategies and ways to reach out to those at risk. For example, in Chapter 17, Kaden has Kiara promise not to harm or kill herself until she meets with a professional for help when she tells him she is thinking of killing herself. This is a strategy listed in the *Suicide Intervention Handbook*. Collectively, I want my work to get across this following idea:

Recognizing that things that you see, hear and sense might be invitations to help prevent suicide is part science, part practical knowledge, part intuition and in part, just plain

willingness to be open to the possibility (Ramsey, R. F., Tanney, B. L., Lang, W. A., & Kinzel, Tarie, 2004).

I want my novella to be informative in that respect. I want to tell a thoughtful story in an appropriate discourse.

## Conclusion

Overall, I am attempting to expand a subgenre that addresses a variety of health issues that can relate to young adults on a personal level—not just in regards to suicide—and to open up discussion on difficult topics. I believe there is an incredible amount of potential in this area to impact young people due to its popularity and more research should be done in this field. Like I mentioned earlier, there is room to expand upon a literary science in relation to health. How to influence perspectives via literature in a safe way with effective literary techniques should be furthered explored. In addition, more action should be taken in integrating YA fiction into a classroom setting. It is not a question that stories can reach beyond the pages; they can linger in the minds of their readers and imprint positive or negative ideas. I aim for the positive. I know my novella will not stir a revolution, but I hope it will be a step in the right direction.

Table 1

Title	<i>Thirteen Reasons Why</i>	<i>I Was Here</i>	<i>It's Kind of a Funny Story</i>	<i>The Last Time We Say Goodbye</i>	<i>All the Bright Places</i>	<i>The Program</i>
Author	Jay Asher	Gayle Forman	Ned Vizzini	Cynthia Hand	Jennifer Niven	Suzanne Young
Author intent	Afterword: He had a close relative attempt suicide but survive. Wanted to show how “everything affects everything.”	Afterword: Inspiration from Suzy who died by suicide and had depression. Discusses suicide signs and includes information on depression, and resources available.	Foreword: Written by Rachel Cohn. Vizzini struggled with depression and died by suicide. Includes suicide hotline number. Rachel Cohn, she says, “The book throws a lifeline to those dealing with depression, as if Ned is there to reassure them: <i>Your pain is real. I understand. I'm with you. We'll get through this.</i> ”	Afterword: Brother died by suicide at 17. She struggled to finish the book, but felt a kind of relief after.	Afterword: A list of resources for suicide prevention. Lost her grandfather to suicide, faced a lot of stigma. Loved a boy who died by suicide; she was the one to find him.	No intent was included in book
Protagonist/ Suicidal Character	Clay/Hannah	Cody/Meg	Craig/Craig	Lexie/Ty	Violet & Finch/Finch	Sloane/Brady
Relationship	Acquaintance from school	Best friend	Self	Brother	Boyfriend/se lf	Brother
Time Setting	After death	After death	Prevented	After death	During	After death
Brief Synopsis	Clay listens to audio tapes that reveal Hannah’s 13 reasons for suicide (mainly involving bullying). The more he listens, the more he wishes he reached out.	Cody investigates the story behind Meg’s suicide and tries to find someone to blame. She discovers Meg had depression.	Craig suffers from depression and anxiety. When he contemplates suicide one day, he ends up calling the suicide hotline. He is put in an adult inpatient psychiatric hospital for a few days.	Lexie struggles with coping her brother’s death but eventually comes to terms with. Brother had depression.	Finch and Violet become unlikely friends. Finch struggles with suicidal thoughts and fears being labeled. Finch helps Violet see hope in life, but he dies by suicide at the end.	Sloane struggles with brother’s death. Resists being sad to avoid being sent to The Program by her parents. Program brainwashes all teenagers to keep them from killing themselves.
Themes	Bullying and how one thing affects another. Treat others well. Reach out to others and reach out when needed.	Accepting and forgiving yourself. Slight address to stigma around depression.	Overcoming suicidal thoughts, depression, and anxiety. Hope. Reaching out.	Coping and coming to terms with reality. How to move forward and find hope after a tragedy.	Importance of reaching out. Stigma and the barriers it can cause. Hope for life.	Resisting. Understanding human emotions are okay to have.

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# What I Chose

*Don't think or judge, just listen. – Sarah Dessen*

## **Prologue: Fall Semester**

I closed the book and slid it silently back onto the shelf. No one was in this part of the library; no one ever was. The books here were cold and untouched. I tossed my pen into my backpack as I pulled it off the ground. For a moment, I just stood there fixated under the dim lighting, my backpack pressed against my chest. I was cold, and I could fix that. But I was unloved, and that would never change.

“The library will be closing in 30 minutes, and the circulation desk will be closing in 15 minutes. If you need to check out any books, please come to the front. Thank you!” The girl’s pitchy voice on the PA echoed in my head. My eyes slowly drifted toward the glowing red exit sign that burned onto my thoughts. There was only one way out from here. There was only one exit. And it was time I checked out.

**Spring Semester**

“After all, how often do we get a second chance?”

— Jay Asher, *Thirteen Reasons Why*

## Chapter 1

I could feel the sun burning through my clothes as I walked from the parking lot to my dorm. My short hair was pulled back into a messy pony tail, but it didn't seem to make me feel any cooler with the puddles forming on my neck and with my gray darken shirt clinging to my back. My Hawai'i virginity was popped this morning, and I was immediately embraced by this unfamiliar humid January weather. This paradise was bleak. All I wanted was to crawl back into my hole.

In front the elevators, I stood with my bright red cart filled so high with my belongings that I could barely see in front of me. Like six other students and their parents, we had been waiting for the elevator to come back down to the ground floor for the last 15 minutes. There were only two elevators in this dorm and one was “temporarily out of order.”

“Honey, are you sure you got everything from the car?” Eden said, while struggling to hold a few small boxes, “I'd rather not make multiple trips.” Sweat dripped from her forehead, but she didn't dare attempt to wipe it with her occupied hands. She had a small build and thin arms, and she looked even less athletic than me, especially right now. I hated when she called me “honey.” Whenever she did, I just ignored her, but what surprised me the most was that she hasn't figured that out by now.

“It's okay, Eden. We can always take the stairs next time,” my dad laughed at his own joke, but unlike me and Eden, he was physically fit. He was into marathon running throughout college and he recently got into cross-fit, so I knew he was only half joking. “Um, no,” I said.

There was no way were we walking up ten flights of stairs with all my stuff and surviving. On top of being barely athletic enough to pass PE in high school, my asthma probably would knock me right back down those stairs. My dad just laughed even more when he looked from Eden's face to mine.

When the elevator doors finally opened in front of us, a tall guy and short girl stepped out chatting. From their uniforms, I judged that they were both RAs. I gave my cart a hard push when I thought the path was clear which was followed by sudden squeal.

"I am so sorry! I didn't see you! Are you okay?" I rushed around to help up the small RA girl.

"No, no. Don't worry about it," She laughed. "I'm so small people usually have a hard time seeing me anyway."

"Are you sure?"

"Really, it's okay, Emma, it's really not big deal—" She stopped dead in her tracks when she had lifted her head and her eyes met mine. I watched as her face drained of color. The other students and parents were watching us closely, but I tried to ignore the stares and the whispers. I hated any and all attention.

"Um, I'm not Emma, but are you all right? You look really pale." She didn't respond. She just kept staring at me as more color escaped her cheeks. The guy RA now wrapped his arm around her waist and started to pull her away toward the exit.

“I’m so sorry,” He said in a guarded voice, “She’ll be okay. Welcome to the dorms!” He quickly turned toward the door and picked up his pace while hauling the tiny girl in his arm. I watched them exit the building and the girl continuing to shake her head in disbelief.

“Well, that was a little weird,” Eden said while holding the elevator door open. “Hurry and get your stuff in here, Kiara. Elevator is beeping at me.” I pushed my cart into the elevator to join my dad and Eden. We were quiet all the way until we entered the hallway on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. My dad was the first to speak.

“I guess you could be an Emma. I mix up names all the time,” he laughed nervously.

“Uh-huh,” I said while inserting my key. When I pushed the door open, I found that my roommate had been settled in for quite some time. Her side of the small pie-sliced shaped room was brightly colored. A fuzzy pink carpet divided the room, and her desk, like mine, was under the window. It was neatly set and decorated with flowers. The cork board above her bed contained dozens of pictures of Shakespeare and some other old dudes—who I assume were also writers—with bedazzled frames of blues, greens, yellows, and pinks around each, and they were mixed in what seemed to be a collage of high school friends. Christmas lights lined her shelf that stretched along the bed side. The shelf was near completely full of books of a range of literature. On her wooden closet, she had abstract artworks covering every inch and at the center was a sign that read, “With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come. - Shakespeare.” I stopped for a moment to imagine what kind of Shakespeare quote I would put up, if I ever did, and I concluded it would be, “Hell is empty and all the devils are here.”



Maybe the most surprising thing to me was that she had been expecting me and to what degree. A banner hung over the window that read, “WELCOME NEW ROOMIE!” My side of the room was the mirror image, minus all the pa-zazz. There wasn’t much room for much of anything really. There wasn’t even a sink in here, and, as should have expected, there was only a community bathroom down the hall. But I’m a minimalist, so I guess this wasn’t so bad.

“Eden and I leave early tomorrow morning, so if there’s anything you need, Kiara, we can go get it now,” my dad said as he placed a few of my boxes on the floor.

“More fans. This afternoon heat sucks.” I looked at my roommate’s side noting that she was definitely well-prepared. She had a vibrant pink fan on her desk and a mini neon-green fan attached to her shelf that pointed toward her bed. In the middle of the room, she also had a large round rotating fan that was buzzing at full blast.

“Good call. How about we’ll go run and pick it up while you unpack?”

“Sounds good.” I turned to face all of my stuff stacked in a pile as the door slammed shut. The buzzing of the fans filled the little room, and even though I knew that I needed to get my belongings straightened out before my roommate returned, I lost all motivation to move.

It took me an hour before I opened the box on top of the stack. Unlike my roommate, I didn’t have much decorations or even pictures of friends from high school. I would have needed friends in high school for that. I wanted to stay as far away from those four years as conceivably possible. The last thing I would want are permanent reminders all over my room. The day after graduation I had collected any photos from high school, including my yearbooks, and burned them all one by one in our fire place while my dad and Eden had gone out to see a

movie. They had invited me to come with them that day, Eden even did her annoying begging voice, but I wasn't one to get out much. I spent the whole summer before my first semester of college locked in my room, where I was safe and where the world didn't judge me. I was the princess of my own dark prison.

When my dad and Eden returned to the room, I had barely anything unpacked, but they didn't comment on it. It was a short reunion, and they dropped off my fans, gave me a goodbye hug and kiss, and then they were on their way. I knew that late tomorrow they would be gone, and I'd be completely alone, again.

The shadows shifted in my room as the sun was setting. I had a perfect view from my room. I was captivated by the orange orb that was slowly falling behind the high buildings in the city. Maybe it could really be different from me this time. Maybe. Or maybe not.

My stomach growled louder than the fans, and I decided to try out the cafeteria downstairs. I heard there were two in the dorm area, but I would just go to the closest one. When I reached for the door, it swung open and nearly smacked me in the face.

"Hellooooo, Kiara!" A short perky Asian girl in a black skirt with pink hearts and a white top stood in the doorway. Her hair was pulled into a long side braid and her glasses took up half her face.

"How do you know my name?"

“It’s on the door, silly!” She smiled broadly and I almost thought she was going to hug me, but she seemed like she was resisting the urge. I looked at the door she was still holding open to see “Kiara” on a Pooh Bear paper head and “Annthea” on a Piglet one.

“Right. So, you must be Annthea?”

“Yup,” Her eyes sparkled. She kicked a door stopper to hold the door in place and walked around me now and hopped on her fuzzy comforter. “It’s nice to finally meet you. I got an email saying I was getting a new roommate, and I was so excited.”

“What happened to your last roommate?”

“Oh Natasha? She dropped out of school. Don’t think she liked being here much. She didn’t go to her classes, which I suggest you do, and she didn’t even go to her finals.” Annthea laid back flat onto her bed now. Her long dark braid fell to the side of her bed. “I’m pooped. And hungry. The struggle is real.”

“Well I’m going to the caf if you want to join me?” I thought this might be a good opportunity to get to know her a little better. I didn’t talk to my roommate at my previous school, so I thought, since she was friendly, that I would give it a shot. Plus, I didn’t know my way around too much.

“Sure!” She sprung from her bed back to the floor, “Just let me grab my jacket.” She pulled open her closet door to reveal a packed color-coded closet. I only really wore grays, blacks, and whites, so I never bothered to invest in ordering my closet in such a way. “Ah-ha. Here it is.” She slide a faded jean jacket over her shoulders.

“Sup, Annthea. This your new roommate?” I jumped to the unexpected voice behind me. A lanky guy over six feet was leaning in our doorway. Was it normal for people to just pop up in others’ rooms like that? Maybe I’m just not used to it happening to me.

“Mmhm,” Annthea hummed as she moved to pick up the lanyard that held her room key. “Pretty isn’t she?” My face shot toward Annthea. I couldn’t believe what she just said. I looked like a total dork, always have. I didn’t wear any make-up, my jean shorts were old and worn, and my t-shirt was just plain and gray. Just hearing the words about me were strange.

“She just,” Lanky dude shook his, “Looks like or reminds me of like someone I know.” I turned to face him now to make eye contact. “Can’t think of who though,” he finally said and shrugged.

“Oh! I’m so rude. Kiara, this is Kuponu.”

We exchanged awkward greetings, and then Annthea asked Kuponu if he wanted to eat with us, which I swear he smiled and blushed at the gesture. We headed out to the elevator, pushed the button and waited. I hoped, from the bottom of the dark pit of my mind, that this could be a great start to a new beginning for me. If it wasn’t, then this would be the very end.

“And I'm not assuming and I'm not judging. I'm just being curious.”

— Ned Vizzini, *It's Kind of a Funny Story*

## Chapter 2

The cafeteria wasn't bad, and at least it was buffet style. When I was in line for the pasta, a guy stared at me the whole time. I didn't have the guts to call him out or even tell Annthea or Kuponono about it. He was pale and watched me with scared eyes. I wasn't used to people looking at me that way, I honestly wasn't used to people paying too much attention to me at all. When we got back to the room, I gathered my bathroom stuff and left to shower and brush my teeth; Annthea had already changed into her crop top and blue shorts pajamas and was lying in bed by the time I returned. I decided to use this time to write in my journal. Throughout high school and my last semester of college I found that to be the most useful coping method when I wasn't staring at the ceiling.

*Hawai'i is hot as hell, but the people here are nice—although I have gotten some weird looks and comments throughout the day. My roommate is cool and perky and so far we get along. She has so much energy that I fear I won't be able to keep up every day for the rest of the semester. I haven't decided to kill myself today, so I guess that's a win for the day.*

I closed my journal but remained seated at my desk. My lamp was the only light that lingered in the room now. Classes started tomorrow, and it was a lot from me to take in. I wanted to believe I could do it. I had to. After a few moments, I switched off my lamp and hopped onto my bed. I laid flat on back just gazing at the dark ceiling above me. My fan hummed noisily by my feet and the city lights warmed the room with a soft dim glow. I didn't know what to fully make

of this place yet or how I was going to fit in. I couldn't go through my high school nightmare again, or even what happened to me at Columbia last semester. Neither was the lesser evil.

"So Kiara, what's your story?"

"My story?" I sounded shocked. I thought Annthea was already sleeping.

"Sure, everyone has one," Annthea chirped as she rolled over on her bed to face me. She was so cheery and sweet. It was impossible not to like her, and also impossible to ignore her. She was just one of those people you rarely knew but it seemed she could already be your best friend. It was nice and I hadn't had a decent friend since elementary school. But even so, I didn't want to share too much, and I didn't want to trust her. I had too many bad experiences with trusting people who seemed nice at first. Plus, who knows how much she would judge me. I was in Hawai'i as an opportunity to start over and try to have a life where no one knew me. I could reinvent me, but there was always the possibility of screwing up.

"Well, what do you want to know?"

"Everything," I could hear the smile in her voice.

"Uh, well, I'm from Allegany. Small town in New York."

"Neat! Were you going school anywhere else before here?"

"Yeah. I, uh, transferred from Columbia," I dug my nails into my thighs for letting that slip out. I should have used the name of some unknown college.

“Columbia?!” Annthea sat up on her bed now. “What are you doing here then? I mean, not to be rude or anything. It’s just that I’m from Hilo—or Big Island since no one knows where the hell Hilo is—and to be honest I wanted to get off these rocks so badly. I don’t understand why you would ever leave such a prestige school to come here.” Of course she didn’t understand. I felt like no one would. I was alone and trapped in my black pit.

My eyes began to water, sweat beaded on my forehead, and my limbs swelled with discomfort. I remembered how proud my dad was when I got accepted into Columbia, and then I let him down. One month in to the school year, and I couldn’t even get out of my bed. I slept through most of my classes; hell, I slept through my midterms and finals. I was glad the room was dark enough so that she couldn’t see my nerves breaking through. I couldn’t fight the restlessness. I tossed and wiggled back and forth like I was trying to dig a hole through my sheets and into my bed. I just wanted to hide in that hole and have someone bury it with heavy, heavy stones. Maybe I already said too much to this girl, and it was only a matter of time before she would start calling me a loon or try to get me to cheer up with some stupid inspirational pep talks. Maybe it was best to abort the friend mission now.

“I, I just wanted a change of pace. And Hawai‘i is, is such a beautiful place,” I finally managed to say. My stomach knotted, and there were knots on those knots. I hated lying, but I hate being judged more. No one would want to be friends with the Columbia Flunky, at least I wouldn’t if I were them, not if I knew why.

“Still. Columbia. That’s awesome.”

“Yeah. Awesome,” my voice was hardly a whisper. “Think I’m gonna try sleep now. Good night, Annthea.” I rolled to face away from her before she could say good night, which I heard her say over my shoulder. She was nice, but she could still hurt me. Anyone could be why I hurt myself, again.



“You'll get through it. I know you seem like you won't, but you will.”

— Gayle Forman, *I Was Here*

## Chapter 3

The building my English 100 class was in looked like it outlived all the others on campus. Actually, it looked like it outlived a war. The external structure appeared almost dirty and was overall covered with age, but I suppose it did give it some character. The colorful flyers on my way to the third floor that were flapping in each stairway were also a nice touch.

### STUDENT COUNSELING ON CAMPUS

#### WALK-INS ARE WELCOMED

The words were printed on neon green paper and it was the only flyer to really catch my attention. I shuttered at the thought of seeing a counselor again. I went one time in high school, and my classmates never let me hear the end of it.

My backpack sat on my lap as I leaned against the wall in the hallway. Compared to outside, inside was a freezer. Everyone wore jackets in here while it was blazing hot right on the other sides of the doors. I pulled out my phone and tried to look busy so I wouldn't seem so awkward. A girl sitting next to me had pink hydroflask with a big white sticker that read *Sea > I*, had her earphones in, and was humming to a song I didn't recognize. All the students lined up along the hallway were each minding their own business. I liked that it was this way.

When 9:20AM hit, the hallway flowed with students moving in and out of classrooms. The doors swung outward and I watched as one girl almost got knocked over. But the chatter broke

the silence that previously lingered in the hallway, and I felt somewhat comforted being consumed in the sea of students who didn't bother to look at me once.

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“Kiara Rhodes?”

“Here,” I slightly lifted my hand for the professor to see, but that’s when I saw Dr. Young’s face go pale white—like she had just seen a ghost. By the way she was staring at me with her jaw partly dropped, it was like *I* was the ghost. My eyes shifted from my left to right to see if there was anything strange around me, but I was sitting in the back row and no one was on either seat right next to me. The other students started to whisper to one another. I shifted awkwardly in my seat hoping that Dr. Young would just continue to take roll.

“Professor?” Pink hydroflask girl asked.

“Yes,” Dr. Young seemed to come back to earth by the question. “My apologies. Kiara just reminds me of a student I had last semester. Seriously, the resemblance is uncanny.” She shook her head in disbelief. “Where was I? Oh right, Jacie Samuels?”

“Here,” a girl decked out completely in athletic apparel called.

I fiddled with my short pony tail. I wasn’t sure what to think by this. First the RA girl and now my professor. I didn’t mind when people say I remind them of someone else, but they don’t usually look at me like I’m the freakin’ ghost of Christmas past when they do so.

“Daniel Shew?”

“Sup,” backward hat dude nodded. The professor continued to take roll, and I noticed one guy on the far right corner of the classroom who kept staring at me. He, however, was not washed over with a pale surprise. He looked at me in a more fascinated way that made me feel a little uncomfortable. He was called early on during roll. Paul? Patrick? Or something. His eyes were vibrant ocean blue and his blonde hair neatly framed his face. If I were a freshman in high school again, I probably would have been ecstatic to be noticed by someone like him, but after all I’ve been through, I’ve found it’s better to be invisible than visible.

For the rest of class, I tried to ignore Mr. Blue Eyes, but it was difficult. Not only was he giving me constant glances, so was Dr. Young when she thought I wasn’t looking. All of it was a little much. I had come from across the county for a second chance. Maybe it was mistake. Maybe everything should have ended during my first chance. Because even here, somehow, I still seem like a misfit.

“There's death all around us. Everywhere we look. 1.8 people kill themselves every second. We just don't pay attention. Until we do.”

— Cynthia Hand, *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*

## Chapter 4

It was only the second week of school and my room already hated me. Annthea remained positive through it all, as I should have expected.

“We'll be moving to room 1113,” Annthea held two new room keys in her hand with a post-it note stuck to the top of each one as she entered the room and walked toward me. She took out a small red heart sticker from her pocket and stuck it on one of the keys, “Here, this one is yours. Now we can tell apart our keys.” She smiled, and then took a small blue heart and stuck it to her own key.

“Thanks,” I tried to smile. I wanted to be just as optimistic as her, but it was such a pain to move—even though it was only one floor up. The power in our room had been completely dead for 24 hours now, and according to maintenance, it wouldn't be fixed any time soon.

We only had to make a few trips back and forth with our carts. It was a good thing I didn't have too many things, and she was a pro packer. The new room looked exactly the same: small and pie-shaped. Annthea didn't delay one moment at unpacking. She was so quick and motivated to do everything. I was envious of her endless energy. A wave of laziness washed through my body and swept me away into an all too familiar unmotivated state. I felt compelled to just lay on my bed. I pulled out my phone, and I cringed as I scrolled through my Facebook newsfeed on my phone. Social media was just a distraction, not a necessity for me. I didn't even have a profile picture. I had a decent number friends on my account, but not a single decent

friend in real life. Sometimes I wondered why I still had mine after what happened. I deleted my Instagram a while back, but I still haven't convinced myself to delete my Facebook. I suppose it was an outlet, an escape route, in times of social awkwardness.

I couldn't help looking up now and then to see Annthea color coding her closet from white to pink to red to orange to yellow to green to blue to purple to gray to black. She was unlike anyone I had ever met. She was as bold as the colors of her clothes, and the words that came out of her mouth never ceased to surprise me. Just the other day she asked me if I would rather fight a duck the size of a horse or fight a 100 horses the size of ducks.

"Do you need any help?" She said while turning toward me after hanging her last sundress in her closet.

"No, I'm okay. I'm going to get to it now," I stood up and kicked my clothes box closer to closet and drawers. When I pulled open the bottom drawer, I found an old brown journal pushed all the way to the back. A picture dropped to the floor from the journal when I pulled it out. Chills immediately plunged down my spine. There were three girls and a guy in the picture laughing at a party, but one of those girls was me! Or at least a girl that happened to look exactly like me.

"Is that you and your Columbia friends?" Annthea was peering over my shoulder and startled me.

"No! This is...I don't know what this is. Who this is. What the hell is this?" I must have sounded horrified. I felt my knees start to shake and fearful tears rushed to my eyes. I was

scared. Though I didn't know why. Annthea hastily pulled me into a hug and started patting my back to try comfort me.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I am here to listen if you would like to share."

"I, I don't know what is, is going on." Each word was caught in my throat and my voice barely emerged as a whisper. Why was I reacting like this? It was like my world went from being pounded by constant waves to suddenly slammed by a tsunami in a split second.

Annthea let me go to look me in the eyes now. "Kiara? Talk to me." I was still clutching the journal in one hand and the picture in the other.

I shook my head and wiped the tears from my face. I hated being a crybaby. "Some things have just been weird lately. Like, ever since I got here. People look at me weird, and I've been called Emma multiple times." I thought of the RA girl, the guy in the cafeteria, and my professor going pale white at the very sight of me. "My professor also told me I look like a student she had." *Kiara just reminds me of a student I had last semester. Seriously, the resemblance is uncanny.* Dr. Young's voice repeated again and again in my head. Could any of this be connected?

"Well that is weird AF," Her brows furrowed, "Um, why don't we go get some dinner to take your mind off of it?"

"Yeah," I bit my lip, "Let's do that."

We found a table in the caf with a few of Annthea's friends, one of them being Kuponon. His face lit up when he saw us approaching and pulled out a chair for Annthea. I recognized the guy sitting next to him for my English class. Kuponon introduced him to us as Danny. His hat was still backwards and he chattered more than Annthea, which I didn't think was possible. During every English class, he was always the one to assert his thoughts and opinions, no matter how stupid they were. I admired him for that, and also perhaps envied him for that kind of courage as well. He didn't give a damn about what anyone thought, and those were his words exactly. Yesterday, Jacie told him he was full of bullshit during our discussion on abortion, and he really could have cared less what she thought.

"Brah. I'm telling you. The dorms are haunted."

"Oh shut up, Danny. You don't know that," Annthea said while nervously glancing at me. It was too late, though. I was already drawn in by Danny's rant.

"Dude, people fall off the buildings more often than you think. Like, right before school started two guys fell from the apartments. Apparently one guy was trying to jump and one guy was trying to save him. They both fell. Guy who tried to jump lived and guy who tried to help him didn't. Crazy shit I tell ya," Danny shoved a large scoop of his baked potato into his mouth, "Bet that room is haunted for sure now but the school didn't say shit about the whole thing," he said as he chewed. I felt Annthea's eyes on me. I knew she was concerned. I wanted her to change the subject for me. Nothing was worse than being vulnerable.

"Yo, you okay?" Kuponon asked looking directly at me. I opened my mouth to speak, but thankfully Danny stopped to look at me and said, "Hey, you're in my English 100 class,

yeah?" I nodded. The change of subject brought me back. "Damn. You should talk more in class so it's not just me and Jacie bitchin' at each other all the time."

"I'm shy, I guess," I shrugged, "And I don't really have anything to say."

"Sure you do. Everyone does. You just gotta go for it."

"No one will care what I have to say though."

"You don't know that. Just speak. Someone will listen," he winked at me and picked up his plate. "Shootz," he said as he strolled toward the exit dropping off his dishes and disappeared out the door.



“The great thing about this life of ours is that you can be someone different to everybody.”

— Jennifer Niven, *All the Bright Places*

## Chapter 5

The picture still hadn't left the back of my mind, not even after all a week's worth of classes. Annthea thought it would be a “wonderful and spectacular idea” to go to a party this Saturday night to help lighten my mood.

“Seriously, Kiki, can I call you that? You need a chance to loosen up. You just stay locked up in this room like freakin' Rapunzel whenever you're not in class.”

“Yes, you can call me that, and no, I don't stay locked up in this tower like an imprisoned and kidnapped princess.” Annthea just rolled her eyes at me. After all, I always imagined myself to be trapped beneath the ground rather the high above it.

“You have party clothes, right?”

“Jean shorts and a black tank top. I'm solid.”

“You wait, one day we're going to do some serious shopping, Kiki.”

“Right. Well, I'm going OUT of the room to attend my Friday classes AND get something to eat—outside of this room,” I laughed, but it sounded forced.

“Laugh all you want now. I am dragging your ass to that party.”

I wasn't kidding about my outfit, and Annthea wasn't kidding about the party. She didn't shy from showing how appalled she was one bit either. But she still made me go regardless. The

party was at a house near campus, but Annthea insisted that we take her moped there and double on it since I told her I was going to be sober. She told me that if I was not going to drink, I should at least be the DD to save us time and energy. I had never driven a moped, so we took a few laps around the dorm parking lot before heading to the house. My nerves kicked in as we neared; I could see about a dozen people standing in the front yard. I didn't do crowds, didn't like people too much for the most part either.

"You'll be fine. I promise." Annthea repeated on our ride to the house and again when we dismounted the moped. I wanted to believe her.

"There's so many people. What if we get separated?" I said as we entered the house.

"Just call me! I always have my phone on me. Of course, unless it dies. But let's hope for the best!" Her optimism was undying, and I couldn't understand how.

When we walked into the living room I felt a little freaked out. Most girls were wearing cropped tops with short skirts or shorts. The girl with the tiniest red shorts was dancing in the center of the living room by herself. Great. I turned to say something to Annthea, but she was already gone. Annthea knew a lot of people and was already a little tipsy when we arrived, so she would be even chattier. She could be anywhere. It didn't take much for her to get distracted and wander off, I figured that out quickly. I decided to stay in one place and pretend to be interested in the bookshelf instead of awkwardly moving around. I was skimming book titles when I felt a hand grab my elbow.

"Emma, why are you dressed like that? Show off your midriff like usual!" Clearly intoxicated with alcohol, tiny red shorts girl was at my side and patting my stomach.

“I’m not Emma. I’m Kiara.” I stepped back as I watched her stumble to grab the top of the couch to regain her balance. Now that I had a closer look at her, she somehow seemed familiar.

“Oh shet. Wait whaaat?” Her words slurred and she leaned forward to take hold of my arm. “No, it was a freakin’ rumor right? Like, I heard you died but that couldn’t be. Now I’m seeing your ghost! And she has a different name! What the fuck?” Cross faded. Definitely cross faded. I took a few more steps back.

“Um, I’m going to go this way now,” I tried to lower her to the couch as she continued to cling to my arm. “You just stay here and rest okay?”

“But Ghost of Emma, I love you. Don’t leave me again. Don’t go away again. I’m sorry! We all are!” She was a fountain of tears now. I had no idea what to do. Some people started staring at us. I certainly didn’t want anyone to think that I caused her to be this upset.

“Hannah Hales, are you wasted again?” A girl with jet black hair with bright red streaks and heavy makeup hooked her arm around Hannah’s waist and pulled her off of me. “I’m sorry. She’s not usually this bad. Well, actually, no. That’s a lie.”

“Did the stoner throw up yet?” A tall dark haired guy in a fitted black v-neck shirt emerged from behind me and went over to examine Hannah, who red streaks girl had now seated on the couch.

“Oh shut up, Kaden, and help me get her to the car.”

They seemed familiar, all three of them, and I thought I should say something while I had the chance. I was sober, which is why it came as a shock to me as well when the words that came tumbling out of my mouth.

“Why did she call me ‘Ghost of Emma?’” They both looked up at me now.

“Well holy shit,” Kaden’s eyes widened. Red streaks girl shook her head in disbelief.

“And why do people keep reacting to me like that?” I could feel my cheeks begin to stain red. I wasn’t usually this bold.

“If you got some time,” Kaden nudged Red Streaks next to him, “Scarlette will explain while I take Hannah’s drunk ass home.” I watched as Kaden threw Hannah over his shoulder, her body going completely limp. He gave us an “I got it” look and started toward the door. If it wasn’t for her trying to speak, it would look like Kaden was kidnapping an unconscious girl.

“Good God, you look just like her,” Scarlette’s attention was fixed on me now.

“Like Emma?”

“Yes, like Emma.” Scarlette looked around at the crowded living room. “Maybe we should talk outside? I think we can sneak onto the roof. It’ll probably be quiet there.” I followed her upstairs and we climbed out of one of the bedroom windows onto the roof top. The view was breath taking and over looked the city night lights. She plopped herself down and looked up at me. The dazzling lights contrasting the darkness that laid upon the city transfixed my attention. “You can sit, you know?”

“Right,” My trace was snapped, and I pulled my knees to my chest as I took a seat next to her.

“So, first, what do you know?”

“Uh, well, a bunch of people have been calling me Emma, or saying that I look like her. I don’t know who she is at all. I also get weird looks from people. Like a sad, shocked, and scared look all in one.” Scarlett nodded her head but her eyes were off in thought. “Oh, and my roommate and I just moved into a new room cause of some stupid maintenance problems, and I found a picture of a girl that looked like me with three fr—” I felt like such an idiot. Scarlett was staring at me with a horror stuck expression now. The three friends. The girl that looked like me. That was Emma with Scarlett, Kaden, and Hannah!

“You found what?”

“A picture. With you. With Emma and Kaden and Hannah,” My words trailed off.

“But... No one was supposed to be in that room. They made me move out after, well, the incident.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying Emma killed herself in the room you just moved into.” The chills from when I saw the picture came back and rushed into my bloodstream; they wrapped my whole body tightly and choked away my breath for the moment. “And how bizarre is it that you look just like her. People must think you’re her ghost or something.”

“But I-I’m not. I’m Kiara. I’m...a completely different girl.” I couldn’t hide the shakiness in my voice. Scarlett bit her lip.

“Kiara, are you adopted?”

I was thrown off by the question but finally said, “No, but I do have a complicated family. Like, I never met my biological mom.”

“Emma never knew her biological father. She just lived with her crazy mom and her mom’s boyfriend. Do you think...”

“That I could have a sister?”

“That you could have a twin.” I didn’t know how to respond. It was too ridiculous. How the hell could I have a twin here? Or had. What were the chances?

“KIARA! KIARA! KIKI! Where are you? Hey you! Have you seen a hapa girl about yay high? Short dark hair and light eyes?” Annthea’s voice traveled from down below. I got to my feet and called back, “I’m up here. I’m coming down now!” Scarlett was still sitting there, still sipping on her beer. “That’s my roommate calling. Maybe we can talk again later?”

“Yeah, I think that would be best. I don’t live in your dorm anymore. But we can talk more later.” We exchanged numbers. “And hey,” she said with a sad look on her face, “Feel free to contact me at any time. For anything.” I just nodded before I climbed down to join Annthea.

“I hope you had fun,” Annthea said as she hooked her arm around mine while we walked to the moped. She was a little off balanced, but the girl could hold her alcohol. “My night was

fun. I even ran into an old high school friend of mine. I didn't mean to ditch you. We were just doing some major catching up. And then she spotted her ex-boyfriend and didn't want him to see her so we kept moving around. I even tripped over a black cat, but then I found a five bucks! And you knowwww I am superstitions. What a strange night." Annthea giggled at her own story. We got on to the moped and her arms wrapped around my waist. "What a strange night," she said again and I could smell the alcohol in her breath. It was a strange night indeed, but I could tell strange was just the beginning of it.

“Everything...affects everything”  
— Jay Asher, *Thirteen Reasons Why*

## Chapter 6

Biology Lab was my last class of the day. The building was still undergoing renovation, and all the construction concealed me in a labyrinth. All of the classrooms that were finished looked brand new—and exactly the same. At first, I walked into the wrong classroom and then was rerouted by the professor. I groaned as I glanced at my watch; I going to be late.

“All of you will doing a scavenger hunt in the library. This will help you get familiar with how to do research and our library in general.” The TA stood in front the class gesturing at the screen. I tried to move toward a seat without anyone noticing me. The class wasn’t too large, maybe only 17 people total, but they all watched me cross the classroom. The TA took out an attendance sheet and looked over it. He looked and me and then back at his paper before saying, “You must be Kiara.” I just nodded and pulled a notebook from my backpack. At my table was an older student and one other girl that looked about my age. The TA continued to talk about the scavenger hunt, but my mind started to wander. I wanted to call my dad after class this afternoon and ask him if I had sister, or dare I say, a twin. I didn’t know how to bring something like that up. Also, I didn’t know if he would even tell me. He was always more on the secretive side, but maybe Eden, if she even knew anything, would tell me since she spent most of her time trying to please me in some way or another. She was relentless in her pursuit to get me to like her more, and she knew what she and Haylee, her daughter, did to me when they moved in with us. But Eden was Eden. She always tried too hard to fix everything. She would never be my family or my mother, though she hasn’t figured that out yet.



It was on my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday when my dad dropped the bomb on me. He was up early in our kitchen making breakfast. He had always made me a big birthday breakfast and then took me to do something special after. It was tradition that the two of us spent the day together. Our father-daughter days were my favorite days.

“Good morning, Birthday Girl!” He took me into his arms and kissed my forehead while my feet barely touched the ground.

“Waffles are bae. You know me so well,” I said as he set me back down and I saw the plate waiting for me on our dining table. A hand painted banner hung from the wall behind my usual seat at the dining table. “Happy Birthday, Kiara!” was neatly written in block and bold pink letters. Dad’s handwriting, as I knew from a young age, was complete chicken scratch. This was definitely the work of Eden, who he was only dating at the time and who occasionally spent the night.

As we took our seats at the table, Dad cleared his throat and silence fell on both of us for a moment. My attention was fixed on the food, so I barely notice this gesture. “So, Honey,” he said, “I have a surprise for you.” I was already stuffing a fork full of waffles saturated with syrup into my mouth before he even finished his sentence.

“Uhm-hum,” I knew he would still understand my muffled sound. He always did, and that’s what I loved about our relationship: we were always on the same page. Until that day. I stopped mid-chew when my eyes caught the fidget he does with his hands when he’s nervous. “What is it?” I prompted.

“Well, I was thinking maybe Eden and Haylee could join us today when we go to the carnival. Since,” He paused. I didn’t like the idea to begin with, but I felt like I wouldn’t have a choice in the end. “Since they will be moving in with us next week. Haylee can share a room with you, and, come on, now, Kiara. Don’t you walk away when I’m talking to you.” It didn’t matter what he said after that. I didn’t hear it, I didn’t want to. I went from being the main girl in my dad’s life to just one of three. My dad was my best friend back then, one of my only friends. But as the years passed, being with Eden changed him a little more each day. So I blamed her for stealing away my dad, but most of all, I blame her for all the shit that hit the fan when I got to high school.

“So do you want to go to the library now and get this stupid assignment done with?” Chelsea, the girl at my table, asked me when we stood up to leave class.

“Sure. Probably a good idea.”

When we got to the library, Chelsea pulled the assignment sheet out of her bag.

“You have a copy, right?”

“Shoot. I forgot to grab one since I came in late. Can I just take a picture of your one?” Chelsea handed me her paper, and I took a quick shot with my phone.

“Maybe we should split up so we can find things faster?” She suggested.

“Good idea.”

“I’ll take this floor then. You can start on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor and we can meet in middle. If for some reason it doesn’t work out, we can just email each other.”

“Sounds good.” We quickly exchanged numbers and headed in opposite directions. I found the staircase near the library’s circulation desk. I could swear that it got colder and eerier as I went up the floors. The 3<sup>rd</sup> floor was almost completely deserted, but it shared the image of a maze; most aisles looked exactly the same except that some had boxes along the floor. Some shelves were empty, and at the end of some of the aisles, the lights were out. I glanced down at my phone to check the list. *Marine Ecology*. I was considering asking the librarian for help and going back down stairs, but then I spotted the sign mm-nn. The book should be that section.

Thankfully, this wasn’t an aisle where the lights had been out, but the lighting still only provided a dim glow. My hand traced the shelf as I searched for the book. Most of the books in this section had dust nesting on them. The book I was looking for was on the list for the scavenger hunt last semester, from what I heard, so it would be the book that looks the most used.

When I reached the end of the aisle, a book was turned to its side and sprouted from the dark shelf. I wished I had noticed that earlier. We were required to take pictures of all the books on the list we found, so I pulled the book out to get a clear view of its cover. After I took a picture with my phone, I tried to force the book back onto the shelf, but there were so many books that it wouldn’t fit into the tight space. I gave it a hard shove, but it just dropped to the floor.

*Turn to page 112 –Emma L.*

I picked up the open book to examine it. I flipped through its pages, and, on every page, it had the same thing written on it. I thought about turning to page 112, but I decided it might lead to something I didn't want to get into. I looked at my phone to check the next book, but then my phone died. I didn't understand. I had 50% left. I kept hitting the power button to turn it back on. I even took out the battery and blew it when that didn't work.

It was all useless.

Maybe Emma was trying to tell me something. Could she be here? Did she know I had found the book with her writing? I let myself drop onto the icy ground. I pulled the book onto my lap and turned to page 112. Scribbled along the margins of the page I found this in neat print hand writing:

*If you found this note, then you're probably doing the stupid BIO171 lab scavenger hunt. That's why I'm here at least. Don't know why anyone would come to this part of the library otherwise. To make your life more interesting, and because I likely won't be around by the time you find this, I made my own little scavenger hunt. So congratulations. This is the story of the life, love, and end of Emma Lawson.*

My phone finally rebooted, but the timing of it all was a little too weird. I took a picture of the note before I was on my way. I stuck the book onto the shelf the only way it would fit, on its side like I had found it. Calling my dad could wait. I didn't know if I could handle any new truths from him right now. I had to find some answers on my own first. Perhaps the journal I also found could help me. But even that had some missing pages. I guess you could never find the whole story in one place. You can't find all the answers by asking a single question.

I looked at the list on my phone again. The screen light shined brightly on my face in the dim lighting. This list was a lot more than it appeared to be. Even though Chelsea would send me the pictures, I had to complete the search myself. Maybe I could follow Emma's tracks. Maybe she had escaped the darkness that I hate, maybe I could find out how. The list told a story, but if only you took the time to open up the books up to see what was inside.

“Labels like ‘bipolar’ say, ‘This is why you are the way you are. This is who you are. They explain people away as illnesses.’”

— Jennifer Niven, *All the Bright Places*

## Chapter 7

I shoved my class book into my backpack as the rest of my classmates got up to leave. That Patrick guy lingered for a bit as he watched me clean up my desk. I had no idea what his deal was. After all, I was the least lively person in class. I didn’t talk much, even during discussion, and all I did most of the time was my best to look invisible. Although after Danny’s mini pep talk, I tried to join in here and there but never for long. He finally moved when Dr. Young cut his view from me and stood facing me.

“Kiara, what’s your schedule like after this class?”

“Well, I have a break for about two hours. I usually just get lunch or something.”

“I would like to meet with you a bit in my office right now. If you have time, of course.”

“Sure. I can do that.” I followed her to her office which was in the same building but two floors up.

“Make yourself at home,” she prompted as she sat on her large spinning chair. Dr. Young’s office was well organized and she had an impressive collection of the Jane Austen and books about Jane Austen situated on her shelf.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” I asked while taking a seat on the opposite side of the desk.

“Well, first I want to ask if you are aware who Emma Lawson is?” I was taken back by her question. Her too? This Emma girl seems to have so many people concerned about her. So many people who are interested in her or interested in reaching out. Or, at least now they’re interested—when it’s already too late.

“Yes, I’ve happen to hear a few things about her,” Dr. Young nodded in thought at my response.

“She is the student, as I mentioned on the first day of class, that you remind me of. I just,” She broke her gaze from me to face the window and look outside. Her eyes were somewhere far off. “I just noticed that you guys are showing some similar signs. And then the chosen topic of your last of assignment really began to concern me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, first, behavior wise. You are showing some alarming signs that I once saw in Emma. And your fascination with death, particularly by your own hand, alarmed me. Emma did the same in some of her writing. Except I didn’t do anything. Something I deeply regret. But I want to help you, Kiara.”

“I don’t know if there is much you can do.” My eyes fell to my feet.

“Something is better than nothing. You don’t just get second chances like this every day, you know? And if you do, it’s probably a sign. Have you thought about seeking professional help?” It was indeed beyond bizarre. I couldn’t help feeling like I had died and then had come back from the dead with a second chance at life. Everyone was offering to reach out to me.

Everyone was offering to care. I wasn't used to this. It also made me uneasy that no one here would have given a damn about me if Emma hadn't died by suicide. Everyone was trying to seek redemption.

"Yes, I have considered it. But I haven't ever thought about seriously pursuing it." I thought about how terrible of experience it ended up being while I was in high school. I quickly shuttered that memory away.

"Why is that? If you don't mind me asking."

"I don't know. I don't want to be a crazy person I guess." I felt embarrassed by my answer. It sounded pitiful. I knew what the correct answer was, and I knew what the best thing to do was. But it was something that is easier said than done. We all have egos, we all have pasts, and we all have that little voice in our head that tells we are fine and we are normal—and some of us don't ever want to hear the voice of others telling us that we are not.

"Kiara, no one will think you are crazy for getting help."

"Well not if they don't know about it. People suck. I know that for sure. I found that out in high school."

"College can be a little different. It isn't nearly as tight knit and gossip doesn't work the same way. Regardless, I think it should be something to consider. At the very least, would you check in with me once a week?" I didn't have many options at this point, so I agreed. When I left her office, Patrick was sitting at a table outside of the front of the building. When he saw me, he immediately got to his feet and started toward me. He looked like had something he wanted to



tell me, so I thought I should let him. He probably knew Emma somehow and probably wanted to say something to achieve some kind of redemption as well.

“Hey, Kiara, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So, I was wondering if you wanted to hang out some time? Maybe get a bite to eat or something? I know a really good Japanese restaurant near campus.”

“I barely know you.”

He smiled, “Well, then this would be a great opportunity then wouldn’t it?” He got me there, and I didn’t have any plans tonight. But I wasn’t that easy. I’d rather not step outside of what’s left of my comfort zone. I’d rather stay buried away in my hole.

“I kind of have plans already for tonight. Sorry.” I lied.

“That’s okay. I mean, it didn’t hurt to ask.” I felt a little bad that he had been sitting out here and waiting for me, but at the same time it was a bit creepy. He walked off to campus center while I headed back to the dorms. I turned back for second to see him whistle at a girl walking toward the gym in her tight yoga pants. There was something not right about that guy Patrick, but it wasn’t quite clear yet. All I could do right now was hope for the best.

“I know life well enough to know you can’t count on things staying around or standing still, no matter how much you want them to.”

— Jennifer Niven, *All the Bright Places*

## Chapter 8

Scarlette was pacing in front of my room when I got back from dinner. Her red streaked hair was pulled into a loose side pony tail and swung back and forth as she moved anxiously.

“Hey, just thought we should talk some more.” She said sounding calmer than she looked.

“Yeah,” I paused, “What was Emma like? Was she secretive?” I blurted out.

“Not really. She liked putting herself out into the open. She liked the attention. She was a very popular girl here. That’s why a lot of people recognize you...or, not you. Uh, we actually were friends since sophomore year of high school and decided to be roommates in college.”

“Oh, I see. Want come inside?” I knew Annthea was would be out until around 10. She had book club on Thursday nights and she always hung around to chat after until they would kick her out of the building.

“Sure.” I held open the door for Scarlette to walk through. At first, she didn’t move her feet. Her eyes were examining our room from where she was standing.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to be all weird. I just lived in this room last semester and knowing what happened, well it just feels weird.”

“I can understand that.”

“How come you guys live here again?”

“Maintenance issues. They said it wouldn’t be done for a while so they moved us to the only room available.”

“So typical of them,” Scarlett said as she finally stepped into my room to join me.

“I’m figuring that out more and more.” I decided not to put the door stopper in and let the door swing shut because I knew how neighbors in these dorms were.

“So,” I said sitting on my desk chair, “I found a note from Emma in a library book.”

“What?”

“Yeah. We had a scavenger hunt thing for Bio lab, and I happened to find a note she left in the first book on the list. She made her own scavenger hunt of some kind.”

“Huh. I remember her saying that class was boring as hell. That’s probably what she meant when she said she was about to make that course ‘a hell of a lot more interesting in the future.’”

“Kind of morbid, when you think about it. Seemed like she had been planning to kill herself for a while.”

“I didn’t know. At least I didn’t know she was serious.” Scarlett’s face twisted with guilt. Her eyes gave away a few tears but she quickly wiped them away, slightly smudging her heavy eyeliner.

“I don’t think it was your fault.” I tried my best to sound encouraging.

“Perhaps. But I think I could have done something at least. Maybe she would still be here. Maybe you would have had the chance to meet her.” My mind traced back to Emma possibly being my twin. A twin I would never meet, know, or have a chance to be friends with. Maybe she could have been the friend I never had in high school. I didn’t want to think about that. It just pushed me deeper into my hole and gave me more reasons to take the easy escape.

“You said she didn’t know her biological dad, right? Do you know anything more about her family?”

“Not too much. Emma didn’t really like talking about her family life. She occasionally bitched about her mom, though. But she was usually focused on her social life at school. And that’s what she would talk about.” Scarlett glanced at my bed.

“You can sit, you know.” I said. She nodded and jumped up on my bed.

“So what did the note say? The book one?”

“I think it would be better to show you.” I pulled out my phone to find the picture. I opened it and handed the phone to her.

“Holy shit!”

“What?”

“Emma’s face is in the picture!”

“No, I— ” I took the phone back from her hands to confirm. But there she was! Emma’s face was white washed behind the words on the page. “I swear that wasn’t there when I took the picture!”

“I think that makes it even creepier.” I had to agree with Scarlett on that one. My phone had been acting weird when I had found the book, but this took the cake.

“You know, my phone was acting stupid when I was going to leave without turning to page 112. My phone just shut off even though I still had 50% battery and then didn’t reboot until after I read the message.”

“Damn. It’s almost like Emma wanted you to see it. Or,” Scarlett looked away from me now. “Or like she was there with you, making sure you saw it. I mean, you are staying in her room where she was last alive.” Great. Now I might have a creepy twin ghost following me around. “I’m sure she wouldn’t do anything to hurt you. Emma wasn’t a violent person at all.”

“Still makes me feel a little freaked out,” I shuttered.

“For all we know, she could be here. Right now. She, uh, lived on this side of the room,” Scarlett patted my bed.

“The irony cannot get any more real.” She just nodded at my remark. We both knew it was true.

“Things happen for a reason,” She finally said. “Even if they do happen in the most twisted ways.” For the rest of the night I let those words sit with me, especially when Annthea was fast asleep—and I was lying in my bed silently awake. I hadn’t succeeded in my first

attempt, but maybe Emma did. I didn't have the greatest drive to live, not by a long shot. But I wanted to understand more before I made any final life-ending decisions. I didn't know what I was looking for, but maybe Emma would have an answer.

“It’s an act of bravery to feel your feelings.”

— Gayle Forman, *I Was Here*

## Chapter 9

*February 12, 2017: It’s been four months since my incident. Since I failed. I don’t want to relive the pain and the humiliation that lead up to and followed it. If I ever try again, I will succeed. Lately, I have been having anxieties about high school. I feel as though the memories will never stop haunting me. I still hear and see the girls in my grade gossiping to each other as I used to walk by, hearing them call me names when I’m in the bathroom stalls and they don’t know I’m there, and some of them tripping me as I try to ignore them. The worst things are the rumors, though. Everyone believes them, and that’s what makes them somehow real.*

I put down my pen beside my journal before glancing at my watch. Today I had gotten up early enough to write before class. But that was because I couldn’t sleep. I had made the mistake of checking my Facebook last night and was unfortunate enough to see someone post a throwback album from high school. Tasha Johnson was tagged in all of them. Someone I hoped I wouldn’t ever see again. She was a slim strawberry blonde that was my first and only friend when I started out at Lockheart High School. I didn’t belong at that school to start with. I had been attending a public school my whole life, but Eden was the VP at Lockheart and convinced my dad the education there was much better than the public high school I was supposed to attend. It was a school for rich kids, and we were average to say the least. We had connections, but that only takes you so far. I lost all my friends from middle school. Some of them I just lost touch with, others refused to be friends with me since I was now at the “snob” school. This was something I will always blame Eden for.

Tasha's wavy hair touched her waist, and at the time, mine was that long as well. We first met in first period when she complemented my hair. I knew how most of the kids in the school were, so I tried to be cautious with friend making. But I decided to let Tasha in. Over the first couple months of school, I would go over to her mansion to hang out. It made me embarrassed about my family and what we had. Tasha, however, was curious to find out more about where I lived.

"Come on, Kiara. Can't I go over to your house just once? Pleaseeee? Pretty please with a cherry on top?" She had said to me once while I was on the phone with her. I eventually gave into her request, but I warned her that our home was nothing extraordinary. She promised not to judge, but promises can be cheap. When she had found out Eden was my stepmother and I lived in a house that wasn't even big enough to have my own room, she turned on me. And she let everyone in the school know the truth. Many of them called "pauper" and others made fun of me for being related to the VP since Eden had a reputation of being an airhead and always falling for senior pranks.

I looked at my watch again, and realized I had to leave right now if I wanted to make it to my morning class on time. I didn't want to go now or ever. I let one bad thing in and the rest crashes down with it. I felt myself drowning in memories, in thoughts, in fears. I was a pitiful student, a pitiful person. It was best I didn't go or leave this room.

I could work on my paper that's due tomorrow, maybe. I pulled up a blank word document, but I just sat there for hours. It was useless. I moved from my desk chair to the floor. I let my body sprawl out on the Annthea's fuzzy carpet with my back pressed against the ground. The room looked different from this angle. I didn't move for what seemed like forever. I couldn't



get myself to feel motivated, to move, to do anything productive. The color of the room eventually changed, and I knew the sky was on the verge of transformation. I watched the shadows shift around the room as the sun crept farther and farther down toward the sea.

In the dark, the sound of the key unlocking the door shattered the silence.

“Helllllooooo. It’s me! And Chaucer!” I pushed my head backward to see an upside down overjoyed Annthea holding a plump white cat.

“Why do you have a cat?” I mumbled as I forced myself roll over and get to my feet to face her and the animal.

“It’s our new pet! I went to the humane society down the road today and found him. Poor fella was just waiting for someone to save him.” She smiled broadly at the massive fur ball in her arms. I had yet to meet a cat that likes me.

“I don’t really like cats,” I said.

“Chaucer is no ordinary cat! I promise!” She said as she set him down on the ground. He strolled over to my bed and hopped right up. My eyes locked with his.

“Stupid cat. Move!” I tried shoo him off my pillow, but he didn’t move. He just looked at me, and then at my desk chair, and then back to me.

“I’m still here, and I’m grateful, because otherwise I would be missing this. Sometimes it’s good to be awake.”

— Jennifer Niven, *All the Bright Places*

## Chapter 10

Emma set up a game, and I was playing it. My mood from yesterday had lightened, and I was back in the library sooner than I expected. It was Saturday morning, and I was the first person other than the staff to be in here. There were two books to be found on the second floor and two more on the first. I thought it would be best to work my way down since I started at the top.

I was surprised to find that the second floor actually had windows and didn’t look nearly as eerie as the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor did. I pulled out my phone to check the title of the second book on the list. *Genetic Mutations in Mammals*. I searched through a few aisles of books before I noticed a book on its side sticking out in the area where the 2<sup>nd</sup> book should be. I pulled it from its place and sat in the aisle right where I was. The book didn’t have much dust on it, so I assumed it was because all of the other sections of Bio lab were given the same scavenger hunt. They all probably picked up this book, took a quick picture, and were on their way. They only cared about the cover that had the identification label. I bet none of them bothered to see any of the content. I flipped open the book to find *Turn to page 322* written neatly at the bottom of the page. I did as instructed.

*Well hello again. If you actually took the time and effort to find this page then I assume you are interested in knowing more about me. I’ll try and keep it brief. No one likes a ramble. I think it’s fair that I begin with my high school days. The days I certainly miss. I had it all. I was the most popular girl in school and loved by all, you know. I knew how to throw together a dope*

*outfit, and my makeup skills were nearly pro. Not only was I captain of the cheer team, I was also the star soccer player. Oh, and I was prom and homecoming queen.*

I didn't want to dislike Emma without actually knowing her personally, but she reminded me of every girl that I hated, every girl that made fun of me and talked shit behind my back. Would I have hated Emma? I continued to read anyway.

*Still, my mom barely paid any attention to me. She didn't know when my prom was. Heck, she didn't even attend my graduation. Liam, her boyfriend, did though. You could say he was like my father. I never knew who my biological father was; my mom always avoided parent questions. Plus she was too busy drowning herself in alcohol. Good thing Liam is a psychiatrist. She's not his patient, not officially. I am, though. He's the one who diagnosed me with depression and prescribed me the meds. I honestly don't think I would have made it as far as I did without him. He spoiled me and treated me like I was his daughter. He was a better parent than my mother ever was. Plus, he had a sweet apartment right in Seattle. Before him, we lived in a ghetto tiny apartment and lived paycheck by paycheck. My mom didn't always remember to feed me either. It was always her first. That's why I was so skinny in middle school and high school. And I was praised for it. Funny how the world turns its key.*

*Well until next time,*

*Emma L.*

My stomach turned at how ungrateful I had been. She had grown up in such a broken house. And here I was, still upset with Eden. In some ways, at least she tried to be a mother. Something Emma didn't seem to have. We were middle-class, but at least I was never without a meal.

I thought it would be best to take a picture of the message again before moving on. I took out my phone and switched on the camera. *Tick-cha*. I forgot to change it to silent.

“Trying to save trees?”

“What?” The voice behind me startled me and almost made me drop my phone. Kaden was looking over my shoulder at the book. I felt my face flush. This was embarrassing.

“I’m just messing with you. But seriously, watcha up to?”

“Oh, just, uh, some research.” He snatched the book out of my hands. I was a horrible liar and my face always gave away everything. “Rude,” I managed to say under my breath.

“Oh shit. Emma left this?” He looked at me wide eyed now. He waited for me to answer. For a moment I think I actually stopped breathing.

“That is her named signed at the bottom, if I’m not mistaken.” I sounded so stupid. Kaden probably thought I was a psycho.

“How’d you find this? Just random? I talked to Scarlett the other day and we both agree you must be Emma’s twin. Somehow.”

“Found it because of a Bio lab scavenger hunt. And yeah I get that impression by the way the two of you look at me.” He looked away from me likely ashamed of his obvious behavior.

“Emma. She was a really good friend of mine.”

“Just a friend? Or more than a friend?” I was really curious if there had been any intimate connections between them two.

“Just friends. She was dating this guy Patrick all last semester. Kind of an asshole but I guess that’s just Emma’s type.”

“I wonder if it’s the same Patrick from my English 100 class. He stares at me all the time and he asked me out the other day.” Kaden looked horrified.

“Wow. That’s messed up.” He shook his head. “I’m not trying to be an ass or anything, but I bet he’s interested in you because he probably thinks you’re like a freakin reincarnation of his dead girlfriend. He was so possessive of her—in a very unhealthy way.”

“I’m surprised how much of a lack of sympathy you have for a guy who lost his girlfriend.”

“Well, like I said before, he’s an asshole. He cheated on her a few times and she was being stupid and refused to dump him. She was a stubborn little turd sometimes. Right after her death he got with another chick though. I never liked him, and I honestly think he just sees this as a challenge.” I was embarrassed that I had been so flattered by Patrick’s interest. No guy usually noticed me. But this wasn’t a good reason, not one I was proud of. “Oh yeah, and he hated my guts since I hung out around Emma. He could pull shit like that and hang with girls all the time, but it was never okay if she wanted to hang out with another guy. Controlling bastard couldn’t—” Kaden’s phone rang and cut him off. Still looking rather annoyed, he answered it.

“Hey. Uh-huh. Yeah. I’m coming. On my way right now. Bye.” He turned back to me. “Sorry, Kiara, that was one of my buddies. I got to go. Was supposed to meet them at the gym 10 minutes ago,” He laughed. “Want to come?”

“Uh, next time. Promise,” I glanced at my backpack sitting on the floor, “I have a lot of homework.”

“Uh-huh. And that is why you are here searching for what a dead girl has to say.” He definitely read my face because he quickly said, “Kidding. Anyway, it was nice seeing you.”

“Nice seeing you too.” I watched him swiftly stride down the stairs and out of sight. Other people were starting to fill the library already. I decided that everything I had discovered

in the last hour was all that I could handle for today. I would find the other books and stories some other time. Right now, I just had to let everything sink in.

“Every forty seconds, someone in the world dies by suicide. Every forty seconds, someone is left behind to cope with the loss.”

— Jennifer Niven, *All the Bright Places*

## Chapter 11

Kaden held me to my promise. Monday morning he had text me saying to be ready to go to the gym at 3:00PM.

Kaden: Hey Kiara, it's Kaden. Got your # from Scarlett. Gym today, 3PM.

Me: You're going to the gym again? Already?

Kaden: Hey now, you're the one that said “next time.”

He had a point. So I dragged Annthea with me.

“Kiara, are you really going to go the gym dressed like that?” Annthea looked at me up and down.

“Well this is how I used to dress for PE, so yes.”

“Ew. You need cuter gym clothes.”

“What's the point? I'm going to sweat. It'll just stink.” Annthea just shook her head and opened her closet doors. She reached in and grabbed a pair of Lululemon shorts.

“Here, at least wear girl shorts and not those oversized basketball pants. They just don't suit you,” She said as she tossed me the shorts.

“Fine. But I'm still wearing this PE shirt.”

We ended up being a few minutes late. Scarlett and Kaden were sitting outside of the gym on a bench waiting for us when we arrived. Scarlett waved when she noticed me, but I was too busy staring at the ever intimidating building that stood behind them. The gym had huge glass windows and let the entire outside world see in. People could see me, watch me, and laugh at me. The transparency of it all frightened me.

“About time,” Kaden said.

“Her fault,” Annthea pointed me. I just laughed nervously.

“Kaden, Scarlette, this is my roommate Annthea.” I gesture toward her. Annthea’s smile touched her eyes as she waved. She seemed much more excited to be here than me. And as anyone would expect, she wore her cute gym clothes, pretty much meaning her complete Lululemon outfit.

I felt incredibly awkward the moment I stepped through the large double doors. It was my first time being to the gym on campus; actually, it was my first time in any gym at all. It had two floors and students occupied every facet on the area. I had no idea what I was going to do and everyone just seemed to know. I decided that I should just get on a treadmill to do something while I observe, although I was beginning to regret my whole decision that I even came. Annthea and Scarlette oddly hit it off and walked off to the weight rack together while I started walking. I felt myself shrinking into a dark a hole but I kept walking as if this machine would somehow lead me into a hidden cave. But then there was Kaden, who hopped on the treadmill next to mine.

“You goin’ walk at snail pace forever?”

“I’m not walking *that* slow,” I rolled my eyes and tried to play it off well. I looked over at his and he was already running triple my speed on an incline. “What’s your deal?” I snapped. His expression was struck with confusion, and for a moment, what I thought was hurt, but he quickly regained his cool composure. The words came out sharper than I had anticipated.

“I’m just trying to be a friend. You seem like you need one.”

“I don’t.”



“That’s what Emma said.” He hit the cool down button on his treadmill and dismounted his machine. He quickly wiped it down and jogged off to the weight racks. I had nothing I could say back. I turned off my treadmill and headed for the locker room to be alone. My own isolation was beckoning me. I caught sight of a few girls laughing and lifting weights in front of a mirror together. They were so confident. So happy. I didn’t understand why that couldn’t be me. I couldn’t even lift the weights that fell on me every day. They were too heavy and much too much for me to bare.

When I got into the locker room, I pulled open the closest stall and let my water bottle fall to the floor. This is what I did in high school. This is how I spent most of my high school years: in a stall sitting for hours. It was my escape from the outside world, but it was only temporary.

But then Kaden came back into my mind and his voiced mixed into my thoughts. And for a second, I thought maybe he could be right. Maybe I did need a friend.

“It's my experience that people are a lot more sympathetic if they can see you hurting, and for the millionth time in my life I wish for measles or smallpox or some other easily understood disease just to make it easier on me and also on them.”

— Jennifer Niven, *All the Bright Places*

## Chapter 12

I felt like I was getting to know Emma the more I read about her life, the more she shared with me in her own twisted way. I wondered what it would have been like if someone else had found the clues she had left behind. Would they have even bothered? I thought it was probably unlikely considering the hassle it took to actually search for the pages, but more than that, anyone else would have been spooked. A dead girl who killed herself was communicating with me. The idea was just freaky.

“Hey Kiara, mind if I join you?” I looked up to see Scarlett holding a plastic tray in her hands.

“Not at all.” I moved my books to make room for her on the table.

“So excited for this pho,” She said as she set her tray down and pulled her brightly highlighted hair into a bun.

“Looks good.” My one oatmeal cookie sat in front of me.

“Is that all you’re having?”

“I ate more, earlier,” I lied. The truth was I hadn’t had much of an appetite lately. Eating didn’t even appeal to me. I was kind of just eating to survive. The only tug driving me right now was my search into Emma’s past. It was an obsession that I couldn’t shake no matter how hard I tried.

“Whatever dude.” Scarlett dumped some seracha on her noodles and began stuffing her face. The girl could eat. She even went back to get three cookies, which she finished before I was done with my one. “You know, you should hang out with us. Me, Kaden, and Hannah. We’re

going on a hike on Saturday. Think you would like it. You can bring Ms. Peppy too if you'd like." I laughed. Annthea loved adventure. No way would she turn down Scarlett's invite in a million years. And no way would she let me turn it down either.

"I'll talk to her about it tonight. What hike were you guys thinking of doing?"

"Stairway to Heaven."

"Heard it's illegal, though."

"That's why you go early, hun."

"Oh boy." I wasn't a rule breaker. I couldn't even break my own tiny bubble around me. But maybe Annthea was right when she told me I can't hide away forever. Maybe I did need some excitement in my life. I could always escape if things went terribly wrong. Yes, there would always be that. That was the only sure thing I knew.

"Well I gotta run. Catch you later?" She slung her backpack over her shoulders.

"Yeah. Definitely. I'll see ya." I was done with classes for the day, and I had the rest of the afternoon off.

The afternoon sun lit up the library as I was back searching through the aisles for the 3<sup>rd</sup> book on the list. I tried checking the call number and realized I was on the wrong floor. I walked to the elevator and pushed the button. When the doors opened Kaden was standing in there. I made a glum face and then joined him.

"Searching again?"

"Yeah," I said looking down at my feet.

"Don't be ashamed. If I were you, I'd probably be doing the same."

"I'm just curious. If I have a sibling, I want to know about her, I guess," I said as we got off on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. "Why are *you* here?"

“I knew you would be here.”

“Creeper,” I said. I wasn’t sure whether to be flattered or annoyed that he actually was taking time out of his day to seek me out—and follow me. I decided it didn’t matter if he hung around, and I told him he could say if he was helpful. The aisle I was looking for was near the back exit, so we made our way there while scanning the shelves.

“So have you told all your friends back home about having a possible sister?” Kaden said as if he were trying to lighten my mood.

“I don’t have friends back home. I wanted to start over. But it doesn’t seem like it’s making much of a difference.” A short silence fell and the typing of the students on their laptops became suddenly apparent.

“Emma had long hair. Did you have long hair too?”

“I did. But I cut that off too when I left New York.” The truth was I cut it a way before leaving New York. I cut it during my senior year of high school, but I tried hard to not think of the even more pathetic me with long dark hair always hanging in my face. I was often called emo by my classmates because of it, and then when I cut it, everyone told me I just looked like an ugly, poor boy. I would receive Facebook notification in pictures I was tagged with classmates asking who the boy in the picture was. It was me. And I got tired off all of it so I took Facebook, Instagram, and my Snapchat off my phone. I eventually reinstalled Facebook, but every now and then I still have my regrets. I didn’t feel like I belonged in that world, or any world for that matter. My hair almost touched my shoulders now, but that didn’t make me feel any better about myself. The mirror still looked at me appalled every time I glanced at it. I didn’t know why, but I ended up telling Kaden all of this when he continued to follow me around the library and ask more and more questions.

“Hmmm. So overall you’re just isolating yourself, you dramatically changed your hair, and now trying hard to research how a girl killed herself.”

“I just want to know why she died,” I found the book and pulled it from the shelf.

“I think you’re more interested in the *how*.” I tried to ignore him as I flipped through the pages. *Turn to page 509.*

*Hello friend,*

*Let me tell you my aspiration in life: to fit in. That’s all. I’m a simple girl. But I couldn’t even have that, not forever at least. I stopped taking my meds already. I don’t know anyone else who takes them. I don’t even think I’m sick. Like everyone else tells me, it’s just in my head. I don’t need those meds, even though Kaden says I’m crazy not to take them. But he’s right. I’m crazy, I’m broken, I’m defected, and I’m not going to let anyone else from now on see it. Heck, no one will even be able to see me at all soon, probably.*

*When I got to college, I was going to start over and be even better than I was in high school. My mom obviously didn’t give a damn, and I wanted to make it on my own. She never called me and never answered when I called. I talked to Liam every now and then, but that was the best it got. But that’s all behind me now. I saw other girls who partied, drank, and smoked and their life seemed so well put together. I decided that would be me, and it was for nearly a month. I quickly found my clique of friends and we had the time of our lives at the start. We were at every party on and off of campus and I even got myself a super hot boyfriend. But even the perfect story has an end. Remember that.*

*Until next time,*

*Emma L.*

His eyes were fixed upon my face, and I could tell he was studying my reaction to Emma's message. "Are you thinking of ending your life, Kiara?"

"Kaden," my hands gripped tightly around the book. I was shocked by his question. No one had ever asked me that before, I didn't think anyone ever paid enough attention to me to know what I was feeling. A million excuses rushed through my mind, but instead I just blurted out, "I didn't choose to be like this or for things to happen the way they did, okay?"

"That's not what I asked." Regret immediately filled me as he spoke. I had to get out of here; I had to avoid this conversation.

"Don't you dare run away," Kaden had stepped in the center of the aisle. I turned to walk the other way, but he quickly grabbed my arm.

"What do you want?" I snapped, "Just leave me alone. You already played 20 questions times 10 with me."

"Nope!" He raised his eyebrow and what seemed like a smile tugged at his lips. "Not unless I can come with you." What was with this guy? I barely knew him and here he was trying to help me.

"Fine," I mumbled under my breath. He held out his arm which took me by an even bigger surprise; I knew that was his way of not giving me any chances to run away. So I played along, took his arm, and we left the library together. My stomach turned with zombie butterflies, butterflies that were once dead but came back for a moment. He was the first not to let me have my way and let me go when I wanted. He was the first to care enough, and this was the first in a while I didn't feel so alone.

“Life can't be cured, but it can be managed.”  
— Ned Vizzini, *It's Kind of a Funny Story*

## Chapter 13

The sky was still dark when we loaded Hannah's car to head out to the hike. I became more and more concerned as the drizzle turned into a down pour. Kaden cursed. The whole car except for me got into an argument, and the next thing I knew we were pulling into a parking lot of a nearby waterfall hike that just about every tourist does.

“Will you all shut up now?” Hannah snapped with frustration. “We are doing the baby hike since ya'll can't agree on shit.” I heard Scarlett next to me breathing “Whatever” as Hannah parked the car. Even though this was an easy trail, so I've been told, I was nervous. I've never done a hike, but I didn't want to tell any of them that. Slipping down a cliff didn't sound ideal, but it was likely with my ability.

We were about ten minutes into the hike when I asked to take a short break. I could see them all struggling not to say anything, except for Kaden, of course.

“See, now this is why you should go to the gym more often.”

“Don't be a dick, Kaden,” said Scarlett who was clearly bored and scrolling on her phone.

“I'm being honest. Kiara, from now on, I'm going to make you come with me,” he paused. “Don't give me that look. You know it'll be good for you. No way in hell you could have done Stairway today. You need to learn to speak up once in a while.” Kaden's comments felt like a slap in the face, and as the hike went on, the more I realized it was true. Multiple families with

young children passed us and so did an elderly couple. When we got to the waterfall, I was out of breath. I couldn't even enjoy the sight, though, by the sound of Scarlett's complaining, it didn't sound too grand. I had seated myself on a large rock and felt Annthea's hand pat my back.

The rain had stopped, but the dark and gray skies soaked through my skin and into my bloodstream. I wanted to go back to my room. I wanted to just lay in bed hidden away. I just wanted to lie in my lonely hole. I pulled my knees to my chest to keep myself warmer. Hannah, Kaden, and Scarlett had climbed up alongside the waterfall for a more challenging activity. Annthea told them it was best if she waited with me. I hadn't moved from my rock but Annthea couldn't sit still. She had been chatting with tourist and tossing stones into the river bed. She sung loud as well, and people complimented her as they passed. She did have an amazing voice that was strong yet sweet. It didn't match her tiny body though. I enjoyed when she sung in our room.

About an hour went by before the three of them returned from the top and we started heading back down the trail. Downhill was much easier for me, and the only difficult part was avoiding the muddy areas. I slipped a twice; Kaden caught me once and Annthea fell over trying to catch me the other time. When we approached Hannah's car, I apologized for all the mud.

"Don't worry about it. Let's just get something to eat. I'm starving!" said Hannah as she pulled open the door to the driver seat. It was just past noon and we all agreed to stop at a café nearby campus. My mood was gloomier than the weather, but no one said anything about it. I only picked at my food when it was set in front of me and ended up taking most of it home as leftovers. I couldn't understand how the four of them had so much energy to do things like this. It was draining.



Annthea didn't stay in the room long when we got back. Like usual, she was on the go. There were readings I had to do and a lab write up I needed to finish, but all of it just floated away from me as I laid on the floor. The fuzzy carpet was my haven. I wanted to melt into its fibers and cease to exist. I wanted to lift all the weight of everyday life off of my shoulders.

But I didn't know how, not in this life at least.

I looked at my watch and then glanced up at my desk. My homework gave me a cold stare like it knew my next move, like it knew I wouldn't move—and I didn't. For hours I stayed there and let tears fall along the sides of face. They broke free and fell quickly from my eyes that were a worthless dam. They eventually vanished, and I couldn't help wishing I could evaporate with them.

“You are all the colors in one, at full brightness.”

— Jennifer Niven, *All the Bright Places*

## Chapter 14

The gym became a usual thing for me which I never thought could happen. Kaden was relentless. He texted me every day he went to the gym and made sure to follow up with me. Some days I ignored him, and on those days he showed up at my door. Since I spent a lot more time working out, I spent a lot less time laying on my floor. Even though it hadn't been that long, I felt myself making progressions in my physical ability each day. Kaden should be given an award for his level of patience with me. I asked too many questions and took too many breaks. That's what he told me at least. Yet, he never once stopped helping me or gave up on me. It was a slow process, but it was progress nonetheless.

However, I didn't completely abandon all my havens. I would still run off to the locker room to sit in my favorite stall to hide away. I was safe from disruption, and here I could feel myself sinking deeply into my dark hole of comfort. I often was reminded of Tasha and her friends when groups of girls would stroll in to the locker room together and gossip loudly. The worst was when Tasha and company had found out I was always in there. They would call me “Constipated Kiara” or “Princess Pooper” when they entered the restrooms and the sound of their voices would bounce off the walls. Other girls would always just laughed. But I never moved from my stall when it happened; I just kept quiet and let their words attack me. My stall walls couldn't protect me from their insults, but they saved me their shoves and pushes. This gym was different though, no one knew my name or even of my existence here. Just Kaden knew and not once did he verbalize an insult to my face whenever he saw me emerge from the locker room.

My busier routine made the weeks fly by, and we were soon going our next adventure: a beach day. Our outings were a change of pace for me, and even though it made me nervous at times, I began to enjoy them. They were another thing that prevented me from spending all my time on the fuzzy carpet. I had never had a group of people I hung out with before. At the same time, they put in a lot of effort to make me go and do things with them. No one else ever did that for me and the feeling of inclusion was foreign, but I was growing fond of it.

The sun was already high in the sky when we piled into Hannah's car. We were heading to a beach on the east side of the island, and when we got there, everyone ran straight for the water—except for me. I sat on my towel and watched them splash around in the waves. I was still fully dressed and refused to take off my clothes even when Annthea begged me to get in the water or at least try to tan. The water looked too dangerous, and I barely knew how to swim. I had taken swim lessons when I was young, but that was likely the last time I even attempted to swim.

Annthea came running out of the water and up the beach toward me. A smile was stretched across her face when she adjusted her towel and took a seat next to me.

“That was awesome! Kiara, you have to get in at least once. The waves aren't that big today.”

“I can't swim,” I shrugged. This time I knew the truth was better than staying silent. I couldn't even fake my ability to hike, so there would be no way to fake my ability to swim.

“Then get your feet wet! Come on!” She had pulled me off the ground and I caught myself before stumbling face first into the sand.

“Finnnnne,” I said as I slowly followed her to the water. She was skipping and laughed like a happy seagull on shore while I crawled behind her like a sand crab trying not to be noticed. The water was cool when it touched my toes. I took a few more steps so that when the waves washed up they would barely cover my feet. I looked out to see Kaden trying to body board while Hannah and Scarlette chatted with their heads just barely above the water. I watched as Scarlette’s smile widen when Kaden stopped to join them. Their happiness was almost contagious.

I remained on shore. I swished my feet through the water, feeling its element. It was refreshing as much as it was scary. The waves could pick up at any time, and I could get swept away at any moment. But there I stood in the sunshine, not laying in my hole, and I was okay, even if it was just for that moment.

“Anything that kills hope is a sin.”

— Gayle Forman, *I Was Here*

## Chapter 15

I had put off my hunt for Emma’s notes for the last couple of weeks, but I finally decided to get back to it. After I finished class today, I would take a trip to the library and find the remaining two. For the time being, I was killing time outside of the campus Starbucks on my laptop before my next class. I pulled up my Facebook and skimmed what was at the top of my feed. My eyes gravitated to the “Search” bar as I tapped my finger anxiously on the table. It didn’t occur to me before, but I could find out about Emma this way too.

When I typed in her name, I saw her profile was public. I began scrolling down her timeline and through her posts and her pictures. At first I was under the impression she wasn’t much of a poster, but then I noticed her status post becoming more and more frequent as I went back in time on her profile. She wrote long rants during her freshman year of high school, and they slowly shortened and the quantity decreased as she got older, but the messages in the post got darker. I pulled out my phone and reinstalled Instagram and Twitter. I did the same thing there and found the same results. Some people commented asking if she was okay, but nothing beyond that. All of the more recent posts were along the lines of:

“No one cares about me anymore.”

“Life is so damn pointless.”

“Favorite Song: If I Die Young”

I looked at the time and realized I had been browsing for too long. I quickly threw everything into my bag and rushed off for class.

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When I had emerged through the library doors, I looked as soaked and frantic as a sailor who had fallen overboard. The rain and wind picked up during the time I was in class and had drenched every inch of my outfit. The wind have flipped my umbrella inside out and left me to fend for myself. I wrung out my hair as I walked to the back of the library leaving a trail as I moved. The last two books would be on the first floor. I pulled out my phone to check the location of the 4<sup>th</sup> book and set off in that direction. The library was still a breathing labyrinth—even on the first floor.

I had found the book, and, like the others, it was laying on its side. I pulled it from its resting spot and noticed the water damage that the book had endured. I opened the book and flipped through a few pages. *Turn to page 206.* I did as instructed. On this page, however, the ink was disrupted with smudges, with watermarks, with tears.

*Hello again,*

*We are beginning to wind down the end because life isn't fit for everyone. My hunger for a restart turned down a road of sadness, and that sadne— was inevitable despair. Like I said last time, even great stories have an end. I felt everything slip away from me al— at once. When the thoughts of death became the parasite that my mind hosted, I began to hint to my friend. She never knew what to tell me tho— . She would fire words of encouragement in my direction but they nev— hit the target.*

*When my boyfriend turned on me, I felt the whole world follow his lead. His slaps only grew louder with time and I wasn't allowed to say a peep. I was afraid, more afraid than*

*I had ever be— in my entire life. Some fears are too great to put in words and some stories are better left untold. But what I can tell you is that with him I was trapped, and in my own mind I was incarcerated. I chopped my hair to shoulder in my room with my own scissors like I was trying to cut away an unseen burden. It didn't do anything. My friends and even one professor I had took note of it but never questioned the jaggedness of my look. It was a cry for help. I felt myself falling into a hole, the light at the top was too far and was disappearing fast. I am at the bottom of an eternal black abyss. I know my mother won't be fazed. She always called me the extra mouth to feed. There would be nothing lost.*

*Now all that is left is the escape,*

*Em—*

The last bit of her name was smudged. My own tear drops blended with Emma's on the page. I felt my knees drain of its strength, and I sank to the floor. Emma's sorrow had opened the flood gate that I was slowly repairing. We had shared a hole of darkness. She had drowned when hers had filled with sorrows, and I was beginning to suffocate with her pain colliding with mine

“I’m not a compilation of symptoms. Not a casualty of shitty parents and an even shittier chemical makeup. Not a problem. Not a diagnosis. Not an illness. Not something to be rescued. I’m a person.”

— Jennifer Niven, *All the Bright Places*

## Chapter 16

The ground was stone cold, but my legs, which were folded under me, remained flush against it. I didn’t know how long I had been there, and I didn’t know when I would move again. It was like time had froze, and I was lost in an unknown space between Emma’s world and my own. When I finally rose and placed the book back in its spot, I heard the squeaky voice filling the room through the PA system announcing that the library would be closing in 30 minutes. I had one more book to find, and I would find it before I left.

I had found the final book quicker than any of the others. It was in the back near a vibrant Exit sign. I hastily pulled it from its spot and let it fall open in my arms. I only had 15 minutes remaining. *Turn to page 413.* The words on this page were written neatly, nearly perfected.

*Hello friend,*

*My tears have passed. They are too far gone with any hope. I have nothing more to cry about. It’s impossible for me to be in this world without being broken and judged. So this is what I chose.*

*One song comes to mind: “If I Die Young,” and I will because it’s true, “It’s funny when you’re dead, people start listening.” I could go on, but I don’t think it’s necessary. I’ll let you chew on those lyrics for now, or for good, because this is goodbye. The library will soon be closing, and I must leave through the only exit that will relieve me.*



Her name was not signed at the bottom. She was gone. She had been gone this whole time, the only difference was that I knew the story now. I had listened to her, but was it only because she was dead? I began to believe that maybe she was right. It's hard, even hopeless, to be heard in this life. I can't run from myself. I can't escape from my dark hole. I can't. I can't. I can't...

The librarian had startled me when she tapped my shoulder. "Library is closing now. Sorry, you have to leave." I just nodded and hurried out toward the front entrance. The sky was iron gray and the rain poured from its heart. I pushed my legs to carry me through the pounding water. Faster and faster I made my legs move. And then I slipped. The mud shaped my body around me. My eyes now faced the vast gray sky. At first the rain hurt, but then it lightened and fell as soft as snow. But I didn't dare move. I didn't even want to breathe.

I heard the sound of a moped pulling up nearby, and Kaden's eyes soon were above mine. He always somehow found me, even when I didn't want to be found. He bent down to help me up, but I didn't move. I just let my body remain limp. It was useless. Sometimes I think I see a light at the top of my hole, but most times that light is only brief and only a faint illusion.

"Kiara," he said, "At least tell me what's wrong." This was my chance, maybe the only one I would get. Without looking at him, I felt the words begin to fall from my tongue so naturally and with such certainty, I said, "I think I reached my end. I don't have a plan. But I need one. I don't know what else I can do. I just feel stuck. All the time. For no reason." Only the rain between us could be heard for a long moment.

"You're nothing like Emma, you know," he finally said.

"Except our inability to deal."

“That’s not true. You chose to reach out. To me. Right now. I couldn’t save Emma, but I’ll save you.” I looked up at him now. Did he realize what he was saying? I couldn’t be saved. Not by him. Not by anyone.

“Let's go. Let's count for something. Let's get off that ledge.”

— Jennifer Niven, *All the Bright Places*

## Chapter 17

Annthea was gone for weekend for her club camping trip. She kept checking with me to be sure I would be okay without her. She didn't see me that afternoon I came back soaked with Kaden, but she was always like this. She had done this a few weeks ago when she had gone home for the day for her sister's wedding on the Big Island, and she made it seem like she was going on a trip around the world while I would be stuck helpless on an island. I suppose half of that is true anyway.

“I put extra food in our fridge so just feel free to take some whenever you get hungry.”

Annthea assured me about ten times.

“Yes, Mom.” I smirked and rolled my eyes.

“I'm serious, Kiara. Sometimes you just don't eat. I don't know how you survive sometimes. You'll be so thin you'll disappear! I don't want that. I'm always concerned about you.”

“I'll be fine. Promise.” As I thought, she still didn't believe me and left a million post-it notes around the room to remind me. I didn't realize it until now, but it was the first full night that I would be spending here alone. Still, the dorms were noisy and people were always around, so it wasn't like I was that alone. The constant chatter in the hallways would keep me company. Or so I thought. The silence held the room in a choking grasp. Just an hour ago I was watching Annthea bounce quickly back and forth across the room while over packing her bag for a short

trip while she belted out to the new Ariana Grande song. I was the opposite. I hated bringing anything, hated extra baggage. I turned my head to face our door. The loudest noise came from my head and it was Annthea's last words before following her suitcase out the door, "Well, I'm off! Au revoir, mon amie!"

I was laying on the fuzzy carpet again and staring at the ceiling as if it were the endless sky. Emma's journal sat on my desk next to my English 100 class packet. I hadn't opened it yet. I didn't know if I could handle it.

My phone buzzed.

Kaden: Hey, how are you doing?

Me: I'm okay.

Kaden: Going to the party tonight? It's Friday after all.

Me: Nah. Just going to sleep early.

Kaden: Lame. Well, as long as you wake up in the morning it's cool. Just remember your promise.

Me: Oh well you never know.

I fell back onto my bed and tossed my phone to the side of my bed. Kaden had made me promise not to act on any of my thoughts on our way back from the library the other afternoon. He didn't leave my door until I did. He urged me to talk with a counselor on campus. I told him I would think about it. But I didn't want to be considered crazy.

I took off my glasses and closed my eyes. When my phone buzzed again, I didn't even flinch. Midterms were around the corner and I was stressed out, but at the same time I didn't feel motivated to do anything. So I tried to let it all go. To just slip away for the moment. If I slipped away for real I wonder who would even care? Kaden? Probably not. I barely knew the guy. Scarlett too. Annthea? Well, she cries over a squashed bug. So that doesn't really count. I just want to be rid of reality, even if it is just for this moment.

\*\*\*\*\*

"You talk in your sleep, you know?"

My eyes shot open and I felt my body jump. The sun was coming in but the room was blurry as it usually is when I wake up. I reached up for my glasses on my shelf above my head. Everything came back to focus.

"Well rise and shine Ms. Blind Bat." I jumped up and let out a scream. Emma, or a clone of me with long curled hair, was sitting next to the head of my bed on my desk chair.

"What the hell?"

"Don't sound so shocked. This was my room first after all." She shook her finger at me. Was I seeing a ghost? Or was I dead?

"You're not dead," She raised her eyebrows and her arms folded sassily upon her chest.

"Are you a mind reader?"

"No. But I am a hell a good face reader."

“This is too weird,” I shook my head.

“Well don’t you want to know why I’m here?” Sharp impatience clung to her tone.

“To haunt me?”

“Not quite. I see you have been doing some research and you’ve found all the pieces to my scavenger hunt. And I need a favor.”

“A favor.” I sounded skeptical. This was a dead girl speaking to me.

“Yes, you know Patrick from your English class? Well, I need you to sneak into his room and get my phone back. The morning before I, er, died, I slept over in his room, and I accidentally left it there.”

“But why do you need it?”

“Because *you* need it. Trust me. You won’t find what you’re looking for without it.”

“Okay. But what am I looking for?”

“That’s something only you really know,” she paused, “Oh, and watch out, he can get aggressive.”

Suddenly Patrick was there, in my room, and Emma was gone. His blond hair hung messily around his face. The blue in his eyes looked like a storm rather than the calm sea I had remembered from class. “Hey babe,” A crooked smile stretched across his face.

“What the hell? Get out of my room!” I tried to scream but no words came out. I couldn’t explain the fear that was eating inside of me. He turned toward the door and took a few steps and stopped.

“Actually, I have a better idea,” He said turning toward me. Before I could react he flew at me and his hands wrapped tightly around my throat. I tried to scream again but still no noise came out. I was trapped with silence. “We’re going to just stay right here,” he whispered into my ear.

\*\*\*\*\*

I woke up for real this time. Gasping. I tried to calm myself. *It was just a dream.* I wiped some tears from eyes and then reached for my glasses. When I slid off of my bed, my leg hit my desk chair that was pulled up right next to it. Annthea wasn’t here last night. But Emma? She actually was, and as much as I wanted to deny it, I couldn’t.

“You can't go back to how things were. How you thought they were. All you really have is...now.”

— Jay Asher, *Thirteen Reasons Why*

## Chapter 18

Annthea came back early Sunday morning before I woke up. She was usually an early bird and did a pretty good job at never waking me up, but I was on edge. Every little sound last night made me stir. I was scared Emma would come back. I wasn't afraid of her, but I was afraid of the idea of her making connect with me so vividly and tangibly. I decided it was best I just got up already.

“I'm sorry! Did I wake you up?”

“No no. I was getting up anyway,” I yawned while I tossed my legs to the side of my bed. She watched me with suspicious eyes. I acted like I didn't notice, but I felt her gaze following me as I crossed the room to my desk.

“You? Getting up at 7:45AM on a Sunday morning?”

“I need to study, I guess.”

“Uh-huh.” I knew Annthea figured something was up. But I wasn't about to tell her we had a ghost in the room. I pulled out my Bio notes and started reviewing them until Annthea finally looked away and started doing her own thing.

A few hours passed and I felt like I barely accomplished any studying. I had just been sitting at my desk and staring blankly at my notes. The cafeteria would be open soon. Annthea



was pulling her lanyard with her key and ID card around her neck. She always went as soon as it opened. I grabbed mine off of my desk and joined her while she held the door open.

At brunch, I couldn't concentrate on eating; I could only think of Emma and the favor she asked me to do. Every time I fell unconscious she appeared and told me the same thing. Maybe I had to do it. I could sneak into Patrick's room to find—

"Kiki, you alright?" asked Annthea.

"Yeah. Just stressed for this upcoming test."

"Liar." Kaden rolled his eyes. He was so good at seeing through me, he was the first, and he was also the first to ever care so much. He would call me out, and he was always trying to get through to me. And I did my best to not let him in. "You look like you're in a daze. I'm not blind, you know," he said bluntly.

Patrick passed through the entrance. I felt my blood go cold as the rest of the scene continued to go on. Time stopped in that instant. I had seen him twice in my dreams, consistently haunting me. Kaden followed my eyes to Patrick sitting near the burger section. I didn't move. I heard him say something under his breath, but I couldn't make any sense of it.

"Kiara, why do you look like you've seen a ghost?" Annthea's voice was light, but her words hit me like a freight train. A *ghost*. Patrick wasn't a ghost. He was definitely far from it, although I wished he wouldn't haunt me like one. I thought of telling them about my dreams, my nightmares, but I lost courage right as it began to rise. I tried to concentrate all my attention on the oatmeal in front of me, but I knew Kaden was still looking at me. He saw through me. He always did—and in the moment, I hated him for that.

## Part 2

“We do not remember days, we remember moments.”

— Jennifer Niven, *All the Bright Places*

### Chapter 19

Kaden didn't drop any of his suspicions like I hoped he would. During the break he would send me “check-up messages.” After his 3rd message by the 4<sup>th</sup> day of break, I asked Scarlette over facetime if it was typical of Kaden to do this to everyone. She actually laughed at my question and just shook her head, “Kaden doesn't usually give a shit about anything, or anyone.” She paused, “Unless he really does care, which doesn't happen as often as you may think. Took him forever to see me as a decent friend.” She had told me how they had met during the first week of school in their Philosophy 101 class and how he would show up late all the time. She sustained a smile on her face when she spoke of him. “He didn't really care about class. He still doesn't really. Even in chemistry that bastard never took notes. But maybe he's trying to seek some kind of redemption with what happened to Emma and all. Maybe we all are.”

I didn't talk to Scarlette for the rest of break. Annthea kept me quite busy anyway. Since airlines prices to New York were at an all-time high, I didn't go home for spring break. She offered to host me at her house in Hilo, and I spent the week there. The week went by so quickly I couldn't believe I was already back in my small pie-shaped room. Annthea wouldn't be back until tomorrow. She told me she liked being home as long as possible during break. I also thought it would be nice of me to give her and her family some space on Sunday before school started up again.

My desk was in the same mess that I had left it in before leaving the island, and my laptop sat slightly tilted on a stack of papers. I clicked through all Annthea's recent uploads of us on Facebook. It was a beautiful island. I even got to see the lava flow. I stopped for a moment on her photo of us in front of the lava tubes. It was big tourist attraction. In the background in the dark, I swore it looked like someone standing behind us. Weird. I continued to click through the images.

"Kauma Caves! Our in-the-dark picture!" I could just hear Annthea's voice as my eyes scanned the caption, but I was surprised that picture came out as nicely as it did. The photo was taken at the half way mark of our journey at the pitch black turning point.

"Let's shut our lights off and see how dark it really is!"

"Dear God, I will probably trip and eat it." I didn't believe the ridged lava rocks would let me keep my balance for one moment. The worst things happened to me, I swear.

"Come on, real fast. Please?" Her begs echoed off the cave walls.

"Fine. Just for a little." I held my lantern tightly to my chest as if holding on would spare me from the darkness. I spent enough time in my own dark hole, I didn't need more time in another one. Annthea counted down and we both switched off our lights. A sudden flash caught me off guard. "Did you just take a picture of me?"

"Uh-huh. Selfie time now!" I couldn't quite see but I assumed she held the camera at eye height because that's where the next flash came from. I flicked the switch for my lantern back on as soon as the flash was gone.

“I bet that came out great,” I said sarcastically.

“Good enough for me!” The content in her voice was genuine, and I laughed at her quirkiness. We eventually made it out of those caves in one piece and headed back to her house. For the rest of my stay, we had covered all the tourist bases. Volcano, Mauna Kea, Rainbow Falls, and so on. I clicked my mouse and the picture changed. In this one, we were standing right near the entrance of the track. I leaned back in my seat and felt the chair slightly rock backwards. That was night I wouldn’t soon forget. It was the first time I had been to Relay for Life, any Relay for Life.

We had made it around the track that night a lot more times than I thought we would. Going to the gym actually made a difference for me, I suppose. I had been able to keep up with Annthea’s quick pace, and I even met a few of her friends, though I forget their names already. I do recall they were dressed as Batman and Batgirl, however. The theme of the Relay for Life was super heroes. Of course, I didn’t wear a costume. I didn’t even know there was a theme. Annthea wearing a cape didn’t even strike me as odd at this point.

When midnight struck, everyone on that track gathered and the lights were shut off. The baseball stadium bleachers which faced the track illuminated with candles and formed the word “Hope.” It was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. “Survivors” and praise for them came up again and again, and for some reason, I had thought of Emma while I was there staring up at the giant lit HOPE. She wasn’t a cancer patient nor did she die of a terminal illness. People didn’t want to hear about suicide. People wanted to act like it never happened. The whole culture of death and surviving is different. Hundreds of people were here. They were supporting and celebrating hope. It was gatherings like this that made the stigma around each issue so different

from one another. Was Emma not a fighter because she didn't have a terminal illness? Was she not considered fighting, in some way, for her life? Was I?

A loud knock on the door made me almost fall out of my seat. I rushed to compose myself and scrambled to the door tripping over my own feet. When I pulled the door open, Kuponono was standing right outside. He was leaning in the door way with his head just inches from touching the top. His hair had been combed back and he wasn't wearing the usual t-shirt and basketball pants I had always seen him in. He was wearing a gray polo that was buttoned all the way and dark jeans.

"Is Annthea back?" he asked.

"She comes back tomorrow. What's up?" He blushed and awkwardly readjusted his unusually long body.

"I was just, uh, just wanted to see if she wanted to get dinner with me or something. No big deal. I can come back." I could see that he had put in a lot of preparation time before knocking on our door. Not just with his outfit but with his courage too. I thought it was sweet how he always looked at Annthea and how nice he was to her. The only sad part was how ignorant she was to his affection. I told him I could let him know when she was back, and he walked back down the hall with his eyes on the ground. Love was hard to get but it was even harder to give. It takes so much out of anyone. I couldn't help but to wonder what it was like to love and be loved like that. Kuponono's door closed with a heavy slam, but I just stood there in my doorway wondering if any doors would ever open for me or if I would always feel trapped in the dark.

“No one knows for certain how much impact they have on the lives of other people. Oftentimes, we have no clue. Yet we push it just the same.”  
— Jay Asher, *Thirteen Reasons Why*

## Chapter 20

I haven't been able to sleep well since school started. Night after night I have been having strange dreams. Chaucer seems quite restless too, but that could also be because I wake him up when I get up gasping from my dreams. I decided it was times like these where writing in my journal could be therapeutic. I didn't feel like I could tell Annthea about what I had seen. She would probably blow it out of proportion and make it more than it really is. I switched on my lamp and took a seat at my desk. My laptop still was on the heap of papers. I moved it aside and pulled my journal from my side drawer.

*There is so much I don't understand. Maybe this world wasn't created to make sense. I know this is a stretch, but somehow I feel the dreams I have been having are more than just dreams. I think Emma is trying to tell me something, still trying to tell me something. Well, that sounds even crazier than I thought it would. But the dreams are so vivid, and they are all I can think of when I'm sitting in class.*

*A few nights ago I was at a high school, Emma's school, in my dream. I saw her in her cheerleading outfit wandering the empty halls like she was searching for something. It was just us there. For a while, she didn't notice me. I tried calling her name, but she didn't respond. I followed her down the halls and out onto the football field. She was standing at the edge of the field and gazing up at the stands. I stood next to her. She turned her head to look at me and I could see the tears that wanted to fall. "I had everything," she said. "But I was stupid. And my*

*mother, our mother, is even stupider.” She began to cry while I just stood there confused how to respond. “Find my phone! And tell her, tell her when you see her!” Emma screamed, and then I woke up.*

*The next night, I found myself near a park. The day was nearing dusk, and I walked down the road until I caught sight of Emma. I could see perfectly into the window of her apartment, but she looked younger, maybe a freshman in high school. I watched as she crossed the kitchen and pulled open the fridge door—but inside was empty. Suddenly I’m inside the apartment sitting at a beaten down kitchen table. Emma is searching through the pantry, and then she pulls a bag of opened potato chips out. She reopens it and begins to eat it before looking at me. “I had everything at school. My home life made sure I was skinny. But you knew that.” She looks away from me; my eyes followed her gaze. She was staring at a note on the fridge that read, Gone for a day or two. Take care. – Mom. I looked back at Emma, “Where did she go?” Emma just smiled weakly, “She left that note five days ago. This bag of potato chips is the only thing I could find in our house, but that’s just typical of her—of us.”*

*Last night, I was in the living room of a penthouse apartment. The city lights were glowing in the dark, and I could vaguely see the space needle. A man with peppered hair and glasses stood in front of Emma who was seated on a black leather couch. He handed her a bottle with pills, and I watched as she tried to force a smile. In the softest tone I had ever heard from her, she said “Thank you.” The man patted her head and smiled. He turned and walked off to a door on the far left of the room. He pulled the door open and walked into a bedroom that was decorated with only black and white. Emma looked up at me and said, “That’s Liam.” She got to her feet to walk over to where I was standing. When she was inches away from my face, she said,*

*“You need my phone. Patrick has it. Lehua 1206.” When I awoke, Chaucer was up. He was sitting at the foot of my bed, just looking at me like he knew something that I didn’t.*



“Brave isn't something you are. It's something you do.”  
— Cynthia Hand, *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*

## Chapter 21

I was probably crazy, but the dreams didn't stop and there was only one solution I could think of that would silence them. It was early Sunday morning and the hallways in the dorms were empty. Annthea had already left the room to go on her usual morning run. She was one of the very few people on our floor to even be awake at this time on a Sunday, so there was no one I had to explain myself to. I walked swiftly across the courtyard to Patrick's dorm. I didn't have the key to get into the building, so I waited anxiously outside. I couldn't help pacing in front of the main entrance.

When I heard the door finally swing open, I looked up and hastily stepped toward the opening. I stopped in mid-step when I saw it was Kaden holding the door open. His eyes were glued to my face, and I felt heat begin to burn my cheeks.

“And where are you off to?” he said playfully.

“Uh, to, to see, see Scarlett!” I blurted out. “There's, uh, something I have to do,” I said trying to get my tone under control.

“Oh, is that so? Well, I don't want to hold you up.” He held the door open as I walked through. He let me borrow his key to get into the elevator, and I hit “12” as I entered. As the doors began to close, I watched as Kaden turned to walk back to the exit and felt a bit of relief that he wasn't suspicious.

The elevator dinged and opened at the 12<sup>th</sup> floor. I began to walk through the hall while scanning the doors for the names. Patrick's room was directly across the community bathroom. His and his roommate's names were written in caps on cowboy hats that were upside down on the door. As I got closer, I noticed the door was propped open with a shoe. I gently knocked, hoping no one would answer. The door was pulled open at that instant and a guy with dark brown curly hair stood in front of me looking like he was about to head to the beach.

"Friend of Pat?" He said before I could say anything. I nodded at his question. "That dude is always having chicks over. I'm on my way out but you can just chill in here until Pat comes back from the shower. Just a warning though, he takes forever."

"That's fine," I said already scanning the room. "I can wait." When Curly Hair left, I began to frantically pull open every drawer I could find. It had to be here somewhere. I searched his shelves and his closet while anxiously glancing back at the door fearing it might swing open at any minute. I went over to his desk and started shifting through all the books and papers. After pushing aside a bunch of notebooks and loose pages, I found an iPhone in a rose pink case lying face down in the corner. I swooped it up with lightning speed and shoved it into my bag.

As soon as I stepped out the door, the first words I heard froze my blood. "Hey babe, what are you doing here?" I was taken back by his casual tone. He stood there blocking my path with just a towel wrapped around his waist. I had to find a way around him, I had to get out of here.

"I'm just, uh..." He grabbed my arm and pulled me into the men's bathroom before I had the chance to get another word out of my mouth. I stumbled through the door and my head hit the sink as I fell to the floor. Before I knew it, he had wrapped his arms around my waist and was

lifting me up. Our chests were pressed against each other, and then he threw me against the stall door and held me there. I tried to punch and kick but in my struggle we tumbled back to the floor. He had launched himself on top of me and pinned me down. I struggled to move under his weight. For a moment I saw Emma, and she yelled at me to scream. So I did. Patrick quickly pulled his towel over my mouth with one hand while his other tried to unzip my pants. I closed my eyes and began to cry. He was too strong for me.

What all seemed to happen at the same time, the door whipped open, a loud cuss, and then my body was free. I scrambled up to my feet once the weight on top of me was gone. Kaden was standing there with a menacing look on his face as he glared at Patrick laying on the floor. Patrick tried to get to his feet but Kaden threw a punch that knocked him right back into the stall door. Some blood started to pool on the tile floor. I covered my mouth in shock mixed with horror. Kaden's eyes shot up at me and then he wrapped his arms around my waist and led me out the door and into the nearest stairway where he sat me down.

“Kiara, I need you to tell me you’re okay?” He growled. But I didn’t budge. Nothing came out of my mouth, not even air.

“When we're in the act of wandering, we need to be present, not watching through a lens.”

— Jennifer Niven, *All the Bright Places*

## Chapter 22

I sat on Kaden's bed with a bag of frozen peas on my head. My head throbbed from the impact of hitting the sink. He had brought me back to his room on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor when I finally became somewhat responsive. I thought of Patrick again and what had just happened. I shuttered.

“How are you doing?” asked Kaden.

“Shaken but...better,” I bit my lip. “How'd, how'd you know where I was?”

“I followed you after I had let you in the building cause for one, Scarlette doesn't even live in this dorm tower. And I just thought maybe...” He trailed off and shook his head.

“Thought what?”

“That you might do something stupid or harmful to yourself—or both.” He locked his gaze with mine for a second and then let it drop to the floor. “I saw that you were heading to the 12<sup>th</sup> floor. I thought maybe you were going to jump or something. I decided to just hang out on the balcony of the floor, but then I heard you screaming.” Anger clung to his final two words. I didn't know how to respond. “But at least you're okay now,” he said in a lighter tone.

“I'm...sorry,” I managed to finally say.

His door swung open and Scarlette emerged through the entrance. “What happened? How come you went to see that asshole Patrick?” Why I had even gone there in the first place came

rushing back to me as she spoke. I jumped off the bed to grab my bag and pulled out a slightly cracked iPhone.

“This,” I said. Kaden and Scarlett exchanged looks. I set it down on the bed while the two of them examined it.

“That’s...” Scarlett began to say. “But how? Like how’d you know where it was?”

“It’s a long story,” I said.

“We’ve got time,” said Kaden. I explained to them my dreams and everything that’s been going on with me the past few weeks. As I expected, they looked at me like I was crazy, but didn’t blame them.

“I think it needs to be charged,” I got up and started looking for an outlet. Kaden took the phone out of my hand and plugged it into his charger on his desk. We waited for it to reboot, but when it finally did, none of us dared to touch it.

“So, what did, uh, Emma say you needed it for again?” Scarlett asked turning her face toward me.

“She never told me. She just said I needed it to find what I was looking for. Except I don’t know what that is,” I paused. “But she kept showing me her life in Seattle. I never got a chance to see her mom, or our mom, in any of the dreams. Just her mom’s boyfriend, Liam.”

Scarlett’s features moped. “She told me,” she said. Kaden and I looked at her now. “She told me how she felt. What she was going to do. I should have taken it more seriously. I didn’t

know what to do, so I didn't do anything. I just tried to cheer her up. Told her it would all get better. But it didn't. It's my fault she's gone and this is happening to you," Scarlett buried her face in her hands with her confession.

"It's not your fault," Kaden said as he softly patted her back. "If anything, it's all our faults."

"So anyway," Scarlett sniffled, "What's in that phone of hers?"

I reached for the phone swiped to open it, but it was locked. I typed in 1234. Then 0000. No luck with either. Kaden and Scarlett tried to unlock it but looked as stumped as I was after. I took the phone back into my hands, then I typed in 1113, our room number. The lock screen disappeared.

There were 12 missed calls and five unread text messages. Out of those calls, nine had been from Liam, one each from Scarlett and Kaden, and one from her mom. Liam had also sent all five messages. I didn't dare open any of the messages. It didn't feel right about it. But I didn't need to see message details to understand her family dynamics in this case. The list right here told me more than enough.

“You can't stop the future  
You can't rewind the past  
The only way to learn the secret  
...is to press play.”  
— Jay Asher, *Thirteen Reasons Why*

## Chapter 23

I had turned off Emma's phone and kept it on my desk all week. I still wasn't sure what I was going to do with it. Emma hadn't been in my dreams recently either. She had been silent since that day I went to Patrick's room, and it had been quite lonely in my head—in my hole. Emma was the only one who sat with me at the bottom of my deepest pit. The one who kept me company in the dark. But could it be that I actually missed her?

The hot water ran down every inch of my skin and began to burn. I had been in here for so long thinking in a circle. I reached for the shower handle and switched off the water. I pushed open the curtains and felt the steam wrap my damp body as I pull a towel around me. As I started to set my basket of toiletries down in front the mirror, I stopped in my tracks. *CALL LIAM* was written in large letters on the foggy mirror. For moment, as I looked at myself in those letters that revealed the mirror, I saw Emma, rather than myself, staring back at me.

Back in the room, Annthea was studying with Chaucer on her lap. She greeted me as I walked into the room. “I got you some cookies!” She pointed at my desk. A plate of chocolate chip cookies were seated right next to Emma's phone.

“What for?” I asked.

“Seemed like you needed it,” She shrugged. “A little sugar never hurt anyone anyway.” Her smile touched her eyes with sincerity, and I reciprocated the gesture. I chewed on the cookies as I stared at the iPhone on my desk. I didn’t know what I was going to say if I called; I didn’t even know where to start. Chaucer had left Annthea’s lap and was brushing his body against my leg.

“He’s so loving, isn’t he?” Annthea giggled. “I need to find someone to take care of him during Easter weekend. I say we go on an adventure!”

Just then, the idea hit me. “I’m gonna go outside for a bit,” I said. “I need to make a quick call.” I picked up Emma’s phone, and I walked out onto the balcony on our floor and took a deep breath.

Then I dialed



“There are so many ways to live, to define what living means for you and you alone. We are so narrow in our thinking, and once you understand that, once you decide to not abide by these artificial constraints, anything is possible and you are so liberated”

— Gayle Forman, *I Was Here*

## Chapter 24

I called Scarlett and Kaden over to our room shortly after getting off the phone with Liam. I couldn't get his words out of my mind. The mixed emotions were imprinted clearly in his voice while I spoke with him on the phone.

“*Emma?*” The disbelief and confusion radiated in his tone when he had answered. After all, I had called him from Emma's phone. I gave him a short explanation of everything going on, and then I asked if I could talk with him face to face. His words nearly were nearly a plea, “*Yes, if this true, and you are who you say, please come. Please, I would really like to speak with you in person.*”

Kaden and Scarlett knocked impatiently on our door, and Annthea jumped up to answer it. They had come over so quickly that I didn't even have time to explain to Annthea what was going on.

“So, I want to talk to Liam,” I watched their faces, “In person. And he more than agreed.”

“And he lives where?” Kaden asked.

“In an apartment near the space needle, but I don't know how I would even get around there.”

“Well, my family lives in Bothell. We could all just take a trip up there for Easter weekend,” said Kaden.

“Yes! Adventure!” Annthea shouted.

“I’m pretty down,” Scarlett added. Right then and there we figured out our plan, but I still needed to tell my dad and Eden. I hadn’t talked to my dad on the phone for over month, and I had been scarcely replying to his text messages. As for Eden, I had been completely dodging her calls and messages. I knew they would let me go on this trip, though, all I had to say was I was going with my new friends. They would be ecstatic to just hear those words.

When night fell, I decided to call my dad.

“Hi Honey! How are you doing?” Eden had answered his phone.

“Is my dad there? I want to talk to him about something.”

“Oh, yeah, of course. David! Kiara is on the phone!” I listened as my dad clarified with Eden who was on the phone.

“Hey Kiara, how’s my girl doing?”

“I’m alright,” I thought about how many times I had said that when I had talked to my dad while I was at Columbia. I hoped he wouldn’t hear the invalidity of those words. “So, my friends, including my roommate, are taking a trip up to Seattle in two weeks for Easter weekend, and I wanted to ask if I could go with them?”

“OF COURSE YOU CAN!” I heard Eden’s voice boom. I knew at once my dad had me on speaker.

“Sure Sweetheart, just send us the info. We’ll pay for it. I’m glad you’re really bonding with friends!” I could hear the smile in his voice as if he was proud of me. He knew better than anyone how I spent years trying to isolate myself.

“This is going to sound trite, I suppose, but you never know when it’s going to be the last time. That you hug someone. That you kiss. That you say goodbye.”  
— Cynthia Hand, *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*

## Chapter 25

I held a post-it note in my cold hand with the address Liam had given me. The brisk weather numbed my fingers as we stood in front of the apartment building. Annthea and Scarlette decided to explore Seattle while Kaden and I went to see Liam. We agreed it would be best not to overwhelm him with so many people.

“You ready?” Kaden asked.

“I don’t really have a choice,” I responded.

He frowned, “You always have a choice, Kiara. Sometimes your options are shitty, but I’m glad you chose this one.” I could only smile weakly. I didn’t have any words for that.

I pulled out Emma’s phone and texted Liam “Here” and within a few minutes a man with peppered hair and glasses emerged from the front entrance. I recognized him immediately, I had seen him in my dream before. When he caught sight of us, he picked up his pace.

“Please,” said Liam, “Come inside.” We followed him into the elevator, but we were all silent on the ride to his penthouse apartment. “Make yourself at home,” he said as he opened the door, “Do you want something to drink? Eat?”

“I’m okay. Thank you,” Kaden said.

“Me too,” I said quietly. Kaden and I took a seat on the black leather couch, the same couch I had seen Emma sitting on. Liam took a seat across from us but his eyes were only fixed on me.

“I really can’t believe you’re here. It’s crazy. It’s like... I mean... You look just like her,” Liam said in disbelief. “I mean, it’s so bizarre for me, you can understand that, to be getting a call from Emma then hearing her voice, well, your voice. I didn’t know she had a twin. Ellena never told me, and I don’t think she told Emma either.”

“This is going to sound insane, but Emma led me to contacting you. Though I’m not sure why. She’s been...talking to me in my dreams,” My own words made me feel like a lunatic. “I’ve seen this apartment before. Emma showed it to me once.” He and Kaden only exchanged confused looks. My eyes shifted to the closed door in the far left. I pointed at it and said, “That’s your bedroom, isn’t it? And it’s decorated in only black and white?” Liam’s eyes widen and Kaden continued to look confused.

“Okay,” Liam began, “I understand what you are saying.” I remembered that he was a psychiatrist and he handled crazy talk all the time.

“Please, tell me what you know?” It was the only question I could think of asking.

“Well, I’m not sure how much you already know, but I started dating Ellena Park, Emma’s mom, when Emma was a sophomore in high school. I could tell Emma was going through a rough time, and her mother wasn’t exactly in the best place. Ellena, is, well, she’s something else, and looking back in retrospect I’m not entirely sure why I stayed with her as long as I did. Though I did my best to help Emma out. I tried to reach out to her and provide her

with professional help, but it became a lot more difficult when she left for UH. I tried to convince her to stay nearby for college, but she was so determined to get away from her mother. I respected her independence,” he paused to look at mine and Kaden’s face.

“There was hope for her as there is for those who are like her,” Liam looked at me now as he spoke. “It’s timing, it’s place, it’s people, it’s a lot of things, but there was hope.” Kaden turned his face away from us. I could tell guilt was beginning to pick at him. “Telling you this won’t change anything. But seeing you is almost like seeing Emma. There’s so much I left unsaid,” Liam said regretfully. “She was like a daughter to me. Ellena and I had a lot of issues after her death. We fought about it. It just didn’t work out.”

“I’m sorry,” My voice was nearly a whisper.

“Don’t be. It was for the better. She said some awful things when we split up. Some things I’d rather go the rest of my life without repeating.”

“Do you know where we could find her?” I thought of Emma and all the things she had asked me to tell her.

“I do, but I wouldn’t recommend seeing her. If you’re that serious though, I can give you the information.”

“I am,” I said. With that, Liam gave us her address. As we were about to walk out the door, Liam caught up to us and stopped me.

“Wait,” He said. He pulled me into a hug and begged, “If you can really communicate with Emma, let her know I’m sorry. That I am so so sorry.”

“Remember, the opposite of bravery is not cowardice, but conformity.”

— Gayle Forman, *I Was Here*

## Chapter 26

It turned out that Ellena was living in a small apartment not far from Kaden’s house. Kaden and I decided it was best to see her that night after we had dropped off Annthea and Scarlett. We had met up with the two of them right after we had left Liam’s place. Annthea, of course, was thrilled by the city life.

“We went to the gum wall! It was so awesome! I *need* to show you, Kiara!” Annthea reached forward from the back seat and put her phone in front of my face on the ride back to Kaden’s house. We had picked them up from Pike’s Market Place, and Scarlett and Annthea’s friendship seemed to have multiplied by 100 that day. They were laughing and giggling with each other the whole ride while Kaden and I remained silent.

When we arrived at the house, a small boy emerged from the door and came running up to the car. “Aunty Scarlett!” he shouted as he flung his short arms around her leg as she was getting out of the car.

“How are you, Little Luka? You’ve gotten taller! Gonna be bigger and stronger than your big brother soon.” Kaden rolled his eye. She turned to back to look at us, but her eyes were only on Kaden, “Are you sure you don’t want us to come with you guys?”

“I think it would be best if a group of random college kids didn’t show up at Ellena’s doorstep. I’m just going to make sure Kiara is okay,” Kaden replied.

“Yeah, make sense. Well, call us if anything comes up and you need us,” she said.

“We will,” said Kaden as he started up the car again. The ride to Ellena’s place was short, but I kept fidgeting the whole way. Kaden, although I knew he noticed, didn’t say a word about it. I hadn’t planned out what I was going to say yet.

When I knocked on Ellena’s door, some of the faded green paint got stuck to my fingers. The door was old and cracked, perhaps even on the verge of falling apart. There was no response. Kaden tried to push the doorbell, but that was useless too.

“I think it’s broken,” I said.

“Ghetto ass place,” he grumbled. I tried to knock again, but there was still no response. “Let me try,” Kaden began pounding on the door so loudly that the neighbors could probably hear. The door cracked open but a chain was keeping the door from moving past ajar.

“Please go away,” came from an irritated female voice behind the door. I stepped in front of Kaden to try look at her, but she wasn’t visible.

“I want to talk to you,” I demanded.

“No!” The door slammed and locked. I felt a wave of hopelessness wash over me.

“Hell if she thinks we came all this way to get rejected,” I turned to Kaden who was walking off to the right of the building.

“Where are you going?” I ran after him. I had followed him all the way around the complex to watch him examining a window. “Kaden?”



“This looks about right,” he said as he started to remove the screen. He pushed the window completely open and lifted one foot to the cell. “Coming?” Before I could answer he disappeared through the window. I moved in front of the window to see him looking around the empty living room. I climbed through the window but stumbled with a thud as I entered the house. The door next to the kitchen swung open, and I heard a loud gasp as I stood up from the floor. I was face to face with Ellena, Emma’s mother, my biological mother. For a moment, we just stared. She looked as lost for words as I was.

“You,” her voice shook as she spoke, “I haven’t seen you in years. I was hoping I wouldn’t see you ever again.” Her sharp words struck me. “How the hell did you find me?” she demanded.

“Liam, uh, told us,” I said. I could hear the fright in my own voice.

“That bastard! I finally was starting a new life. No daughter. No man. I thought I had gotten rid of all my baggage. I could finally find a new family,” she snapped.

It was like her words had set off a trigger. I felt my fears that were built up in a dam wash away. Adrenaline surged through my veins and the heat in my face lifted me from my hole. “How can you say that? How can you talk about Emma like that? Like she’s disposable!”

“No one wants a suicide kid. I need to be looking out for myself. It was better to disassociate myself from that whole situation.” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, what was coming out of the mouth of this woman. I had gone most of my life hating Eden for trying too hard, and here was my biological mother standing in front of me who barely gave my twin sister the time of day.

“Emma was right. You know, she’s talked to me in my dreams—as a ghost you could say. I know that you always left her and barely fed her. She wanted me to tell you that you’re stupid, but that doesn’t even begin to describe what a narcissistic bitch you are!” The next thing I felt was a hard slap across my face.

“Shut up!” Ellena screamed. She raised her hand to slap me again, but this time I grabbed her arm.

“You didn’t deserve Emma or Liam,” I said in a low voice, “You don’t even deserve a family.” I stepped around her, walked out the door with Kaden behind me, and I never looked back.

“People are screwed up in this world. I’d rather be with someone screwed up and open about it than somebody perfect and ready to explode.”  
— Ned Vizzini, *It's Kind of a Funny Story*

## Chapter 27

I had held it together as we pulled out of Ellena’s apartment complex and headed down the street. My anger was still running at a high. Kaden hadn’t said a word, but he kept stealing glances at me as he drove. I figured he, like I, did not feel as though the last 24 hours were real. I had just seen two strangers whom I had only found out about in my dreams. I had met them, conversed with them, adored one, and hated the other.

The lights blurred passed in the window as we drove. When we had turned onto Kaden’s street, I couldn’t hold it in any longer. I didn’t know what it was. Maybe it was hurt, maybe it was hate, maybe it was everything else I couldn’t describe. It all streamed down my face. I felt the car come to a stop. I lifted my hands from my face to turn toward Kaden. In the dim street lighting, I could barely see him through the blur in my eyes.

“Hey,” the soft word was accompanied by a touch to my shoulder. I put my face back into my hands and let myself cry. Kaden had reached across and pulled me into his arms. I cried and cried and cried until I had no tears left. I had nothing left. The darkness sat around us in silence. It felt like Kaden and I were the only one existing in that moment. I pulled away from his arms to look at him while our faces remained close. Just then, he leaned and kissed me.

“You’re strong, Kiara,” He whispered, “I know you’ll get through this. Through everything.”

The living room was dark when we entered the house. The flames from the fireplace danced along the walls. Annthea, Scarlett, and Luka immediately stopped talking as soon as they saw us come in.

“Hey! You guys are back!” Annthea smiled while Luka came running to give Kaden a hug. Scarlett narrowed her eyes then quickly looked away. We stood motionless as we observed her rise from her seat by the fire with a cold scowl on her face as she darted up the stairs without bothering to look at either me or Kaden.

“What’s up with her?” Kaden asked turning toward Annthea. She merely shrugged. We joined her by the fire.

“Well,” Annthea began, “It’s weird. Scarlett was happy as a bunny all day, but just a little while ago her mood suddenly changed. I tried to get her to talk about what was wrong, but she kept dodging the topic. It’s whatever, I guess. I’m sure she’ll be fine in the morning.” Kaden and I just nodded. I never seen Scarlett so on edge.

“What’s that you got there?” Kaden asked while peering at the blue book on Annthea’s lap.

“Oh, this? It’s my journal. I take it everywhere I go,” she giggled. “I love writing down my experiences and ideas. Someday, maybe, I want to become an author. There are so many stories I want to share, so many stories I want people to hear.

“That’s awesome,” I said.

“I was just telling Little Luka here some of my good ones,” she said as she tickled him and he jolted with laughter. “I mean, just think, everyone has a story, and we all can learn something from each other. But...” her eyes fell into the flames as she spoke, “But my parents want me to be a nurse. Guess we’ll see what happens.” I could tell Annthea put a lot of thought into her future. She knew what she wanted. I didn’t like thinking too far ahead. For me, the present was enough to deal with.

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“Everything changes. That's the only constant.”  
— Cynthia Hand, *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*

## Chapter 28

A lot had changed in just one week, and I was back to my usual spot on the carpet staring at the ceiling. Kaden said I could get through everything, but I don't think he ever anticipated *this*. It was like I was back to square one, or perhaps even negative two. Even Annthea was avoiding me which was an all time low. But I had deserved it.

When we had gotten back to Hawai'i, Scarlettte was acting weird. She avoided us like the plague. She had rejected our invitation to eat with us at dinner and instead moved to sit with people I didn't even know were her friends. She wouldn't look me or Kaden when the opportunity arose either. I had asked Kaden about her behavior, but he was just as stumped as I was. Quite frankly, the whole thing had him feeling down. “She's like my best friend,” he said, “But she won't even reply to my messages.”

It took a few days for Kaden set off the spark that ignited Scarlettte into a raging fire. Kaden and I were crossing the courtyard near the dorms on our way back from the gym when we spotted Scarlettte hanging around a few guys practicing their skate moves on a bench. “I had enough of her bullshit already,” Kaden said to me as he stopped to watch her. “I'm going to just straight up ask her what her deal is.” He took off toward her, and I had to run to catch up. The moment Scarlettte saw us coming, she stood up and began to start off in the opposition direction. Kaden picked up his speed and ran to block her path. She turned around only to be disgusted when she faced me instead of Kaden. She buried her face in her hands. She screamed at us to

leave her the hell alone. Kaden reached out to touch her shoulder, but she recoiled at the gesture. She pulled her hands away from her face and moved to glare at us directly in the eyes.

“Don’t play dumb with me!” she screamed. “I saw you two kiss in your car that night. I went to take out the trash and saw your car parked down the street. I ran down there to see if you guys were okay, and you were busy being lip locked. Well you know what? We were there for Emma! You assholes are selfish!” Her face was crimson and her voice cracked with hurt. It was that moment that I realized the obvious. That Scarlett had interest in Kaden. But Kaden didn’t see it.

“The hell?” Kaden yelled back. “Why does that even matter?”

“There is nothing between us! I swear. It’s not like that at all!” Now Kaden was the one who grimaced with hurt. But I didn’t regret those words, I was trying to save a friendship, but I only broke another. Scarlett only shook her head at us. She couldn’t fight back the tears. “Stay away from me,” was the last words I heard from her.

Anthea tried to remain neutral, but then I snapped at her in all my frustration. I wanted to fix things between me and Scarlett, somehow.

“Mind your own damn business!” I recall shouting, “I don’t need advice from you!” I don’t think I truly meant the words I said, but I said them. She started spending nights away from the room, and even Emma wouldn’t keep me company in my dreams. So Kaden became my only friend, but even that eroded with time. His mannerism grew cold after our encounter with Scarlett. He was mean when we argued and easily offended in conversation. Sometimes I would text him, but I would lower my phone with tears in my eyes after I had read his responses. I

couldn't be mean or rude. If I said something too offensive he could easily stop talking to me. I had much more to lose than he did. I would be forced to be in my hole alone. I couldn't lose another friend. Maybe someone even more than a friend, even though I denounced everything about us to Scarlett.

I got up from the floor and picked up my phone that was sitting on my bed. I dialed the one number I never thought I would call.

"Hi Kiara Honey! How are you doing?" Eden's smile radiated even through the phone.

"Not well, to be honest. I just, well, I just needed someone to talk to."

"Of course I am here to listen! You know that, Kiara. Tell me what's going on? I promise I'll do my very best to help," she chirped. I thought of Ellena and how fortunate I was. So I told her. I told her everything, and she was the first person I felt that I truly reached out to for help.



“Nothing can remind you of your own fragile place in the universe so powerfully as someone your own age dying suddenly, here one minute, gone the next.”  
— Cynthia Hand, *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*

## Chapter 29

I had a missed call and a few text messages from Kaden when I pulled my phone out of my bag as I was leaving the gym. He hadn’t talked to me in a few days. The messages all said the same exact thing.

Kaden: Annthea was in a bad moped accident. Going to the hospital now to see her.

My heart raced and my feet followed. I pushed passed other students as I ran to the bus stop. On the ride there I couldn’t help worrying. When I arrived, Kaden, Scarlettte, and Hannah were there already. The doctors told us she only had moments more to live. There was nothing more they could do for her. I dropped to my knees as I looked at her face, the face that was always smiling. I would never see her smile or hear her good mornings. The fuzzy carpet I used to lie on would only be a reminder of her.

“I’m sorry, Annthea,” I sobbed, “If, if you can hear me, I didn’t mean what, what I said. You always give me the best advice. You always make me smile. Ever since I got to Hawai’i, you helped me see the light when I was always in the darkne—” I choked on my last word. Kaden, Scarlettte, and Hannah all fell on the floor beside me, and I was pulled into a group hug. We cried together. It was all out of our control now.

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Footsteps passed in hallway and the occasional sound of the monitor remained the only noise. I had fallen asleep on the chair in the corner of room. When I sat up, I heard giggling.

“You really do talk in your sleep,” I almost fell out of chair at the voice. I scrambled to my feet to face Annthea—who was standing next to Emma.

“Told you,” Emma laughed.

“This can’t be real,” I said in disbelief.

“It’s as real as you want it to be, Kiara,” shrugged Emma.

“Kiara,” Annthea said as she stepped forward, “I forgive you.” I threw my arms around her. “Make good choices, okay? Don’t give up,” She whispered into my ear. Then my arms slipped through her body and Emma faded along with her.

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The sound of a door slamming woke me. I frantically looked around the room. Kuponon was beside Annthea’s bed, his face pressed to her lifeless body. The doctors stood opposite to him on the other side of the bed.

“She’s gone,” sniffled Scarlett. She sat on the floor between Kaden and Hannah. I rose from the chair to move next to them.

“She’ll never truly be gone,” I said. It was like I could feel Annthea’s and Emma’s presence lingering in the room, “Not for us.”

“The people we love are never truly gone.”  
— Cynthia Hand, *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*

## Chapter 30

The car rolled through the dark, but the fear I once felt was absent. After we had left the hospital, Hannah drove us all back to the dorms. We went to the roof of the freshman tower and cried under the stars until our eyes would no longer produce tears. The night felt as though it would never end, but we were all somehow pulled back together in this storm of emotions. Kaden’s warm body was pressed closely to mine as the cold night wrapped around us. Scarlett sat on my other side and let her head fall on my shoulder. I was numb. It didn’t feel real.

It was almost 2AM when Hannah proposed we hike Stairway to Heaven. So right then and there it was decided. The car remained silent on the way there, no one fought, no one cussed, no one dared to make sound. I could feel we were all breaking on the inside, and this was our way to cope.

The stairs felt like eternity. One came after another and even the rain and wind slammed us without mercy. But we pursued on. At times I felt like I was dying, like I couldn’t go any farther, but I knew I had strength. Physically, I had changed my lifestyle to a point where I knew my legs could keep going. Annthea’s last words to me still rung in my mind and heart, *Don’t give up*. And I didn’t. I slipped and I fell a number of times, but I kept climbing. The dark pathway reminded me of when Annthea told me to shut off my light while we were in Kaumana caves. Even though the darkness scared me, I knew she was still next to me when we switched our lights off. I felt the same now in the black morning setting; she was there with me, still believing that it would turn out all right.

When we finally got to the top, we sat in the darkness. The sun would show itself soon. Kaden put his hand over mine.

“Monday,” he said, “We should probably all go visit the counseling center on campus.” I nodded my head. When he had asked me to go see a counselor before, I only loosely agreed. This time was different. I meant it, and the look on his face confirmed that he knew that.

The sky began to bleed with colors. We all got to our feet to watch the light begin to touch every part of the world below us. I had never felt so high up. It was truly as close to heaven as we could get. The cold wind in the dark was now a cool breeze of the morning. I knew Annthea would have loved it up here, and so would have Emma, but maybe they were in some place even more beautiful. The night can be filled with many heartbreaking moments, perhaps even one after another, but in the end, the sun still rose.

“Life can be hard and beautiful and messy, but hopefully, it will be long. If it is, you will see that it's unpredictable, and that the dark periods comes, but they abate—sometimes with a lot of support—and the tunnel widens, allowing the sun back in. If you're in the dark, it might feel like you will always be there.

Fumbling. Alone. But you won't—and you're not.”

— Gayle Forman, *I Was Here*

## Chapter 31

Today makes three weeks since I been visiting the counseling center. Every time I go in, I still see the flyer I saw as I walked to my English 100 class on the very first day. But I see it differently now as it had a whole new meaning to me. I'm not cured of grief and my own dark thoughts, but I'm learning to cope. The rest of the group is starting to do better as well. Last week, we set up a small memorial on the side of the street at the site of Annthea's crash. I took the photo of Emma and added it to the memorial as well. On that first day, many people stopped by to leave flowers, but some lingered to ask why Emma's picture was there as well.

“Since so many people are asking, I want to say something,” I said facing a group of strangers. “Annthea was one of the best friends I had ever known, and Emma is the twin, the friend, I'll never personally know. Annthea didn't have a choice to leave. She didn't know there would be a drunk driver on the road when she would be driving her moped. We all sympathize with her. But Emma didn't feel like she had a choice either.” I thought of Liam's words, “But that doesn't mean there is no hope for people like her. It's timing, it's place, it's people, it's a lot of things, but there is hope. That's something we should all remember. She was a student just like any of us, but she needed people. That's why her photo is here.” No one argued with me on that.

Hannah pulled the car up by my dorm tower, and I got in to join the others. The atmosphere was different than our ride to Stairway to Heaven. Hannah and Scarlett were joking with each other, and even Kaden jumped in with a sarcastic remark now and then. We headed to Waikiki for the lantern memorial. I had heard about the ceremony from others, but what I saw was incomparable. Everything was breath taking.

The sunset colors danced along my ankles in the water as I set one lantern onto the ocean surface for Annthea and another for Emma. The Band Perry song that Emma had scribbled into one of her clues suddenly came back to mind. *It's fun when you're dead, people start listening.* But I realized for the first time that wasn't the case, at least not the only one. People start listening when you start talking, when you start trying, when you start to reach out. There were a lot of things in life you can't choose, but here and right now, I knew I had a choice. I decided I wouldn't hide in my hole forever; I decided to choose to talk, to share, and to live.